

Chapter 1: "*Machine-Fish*"

"Full stop. Rest ready."

These words glowed in vivid red against the black background of the *NX-1*'s control order-board. A wheel was spun over, a lever pulled back, and in the hull of the submarine descended the peculiar silence found only in mile-deep waters. Men rested at their posts, eyes alert.

Above, in the control room, Hemingway Bowman, youthful first officer, glanced at the televue screen and swore softly.

"Keith," he said, "between you and me, I'll be damned glad when this monotonous job's over. I joined the Navy to see the world, but this charting job's giving me entirely too many close-ups of the deadest parts of it!"

Commander Keith Wells. U. S. N., grinned broadly. "Well," he remarked, "in a few minutes we can call it a day—or night, rather—and then it's back to the

Falcon while the day shift 'sees the world.'" He turned again to his dials as Hemmy Bowman, with a sigh, resumed work.

"Depth, six thousand feet. Visibility poor. Bottom eight thousand," he said into the phone hung before his lips, and fifty feet aft, in a small cubby, a blue-clad figure monotonously repeated the observations and noted them down in an official geographical survey report.

Such had been their routine for two tiring weeks, all part of the *NX-1*'s present work of re-charting the Newfoundland banks.

As early as 1929 slight cataclysms had begun to tear up the sea-floor of this region, and of late—1935—seismographs and cable companies had reported titanic upheavals and sinkings of the ocean bed, changing hundreds of miles of underwater territory. Finally Washington decided to chart the alterations this series of sub-sea earthquakes had wrought.

And for this job the *NX-1* was detailed. A super-submarine fresh from the yards, small, but modern to the last degree, she contained such exclusive features as a sheathing of the tough new glycosteel, automatic air rectifiers, a location chart for showing positions of nearby submarines, the newly developed Edsel electric motors, and automatic televue screen. When below surface she was a sealed tube of metal one hundred feet long, and possessed of an enormous cruising radius. From the flower of the Navy some thirty men were picked, and in company with the mother-ship *Falcon* she put out to combine an exhaustive trial trip with the practical charting of the newly changed ocean floor.

Now this work was almost over. Keith Wells told himself that he, like Bowman, would be glad to set foot on land again. This surveying was important, of course, but too dry for him—no action. He smiled at the lines of boredom on Hemmy's brow as the younger man stared gloomily into the televue screen.

And then the smile left his lips. The radio operator, in a cubby adjoining the control room, had spoken into the communication tube:

"Urgent call for you, sir! From Captain Knapp!"

Wells reached out and clipped a pair of extension phones over his ears. The deep voice of Robert Knapp, captain of the mother-ship *Falcon*, came ringing in. It was strained with an excitement unusual to him.

"Wells? Knapp speaking. Something damned funny's just happened near here. You know the fishing fleet that was near us yesterday morning?"

"Yes?"

"Well, the whole thing's gone down! Destroyed, absolutely! The sea's been like glass, the weather perfect—yet from the wreckage, what there is of it, you'd think a typhoon had struck! I can't begin to explain it. No survivors, either, so far, though we're hunting for them."

"You say the boats are completely destroyed?"

"Smashed like driftwood. I tell you it's preposterous—and yet it's the fact. I think you'd better return at once, old man; you're only half an hour off. And come on the surface; it's getting light now, and you might pick up something. God knows what this means, Keith, but it's up to us to find out. It's—it's got me...."

His tones were oddly disturbed—almost scared—and this from a man who didn't know what fear was.

"But Bob," Keith asked, "how did you—"

"Stand by a minute! The lookout reports survivors!"

Wells turned to meet Bowman's inquisitive face. He quickly repeated the gist of Knapp's weird story. "We saw them at dusk, last evening—remember? And now they're gone, destroyed. What can have done it?"

For some minutes the two surprised men speculated on the strange occurrence. Then Knapp's voice again rang in the headphones.

"Wells? My God, man, this is getting downright fantastic! We've just taken two survivors on board; one's barely alive and the other crazy. I can't get an intelligible thing from him; he keeps shrieking about writhing arms and awful eyes—and monsters he calls 'machine-fish'!"

"You're sure he's insane?"

Robert Knapp's voice hesitated queerly.

"Well, he's shrieking about 'machine-fish'—fish with machines over them!... I—I'm going to broadcast the whole story to the land stations. 'Machine-fish'! I don't know.... I don't know.... You'd better hurry back, Wells!"

He rang off.

Keith slipped off the headphones and told Bowman what he had learned. Hardy, staunchly built craft, those fishing boats were; born in the teeth of gales. What horror could have ripped them—all of them—to

driftwood, with the weather perfect? And a half-mad survivor, raving about "machine-fish"!

"Such things are preposterous," Bowman commented scornfully.

"But—the fleet's gone, Hemmy," Keith replied.

"Anyway, we'll speed back, and see what it's all about."

He punched swift commands on the control studs.

"Empty Tanks, Zoom to Surface, Full Speed," the crimson words glared down below, and the *NX-1* at once shoved her snout up, trembling as her great electric motors began their pulsing whine. The delicate fingers of the massed dials before Keith danced exultantly. The depth-levels tolled out:

"Seven thousand ... six thousand ... five thousand—"

"Keith! Look there!"

Hemmy Bowman was pointing with amazement at the location chart, a black mesh screen that showed the

position of other submarines within a radius of two miles. In one corner, a spot of vivid red was shining.

"But it can't be a submarine!" Wells objected. "Our reports would have mentioned it!"

The two officers stared at each other.

"Machine-fish!" Bowman whispered softly. "If there were machines, the metal would register on the chart."

"It must be them!" the commander roared, coming out of his daze. "And, by God, we're going after them!"

Rapidly he brought the *NX-1* out of her zoom to the surface, and left her at four thousand feet, in perfect trim, while he read the instruments closely.

A green spot in the center of the location chart denoted the *NX-1*'s exact position. A distance of perhaps forty inches separated it from the red light on the meshed screen—which represented, roughly, a

mile and a half. Below the chart was a thick dial, over which a black hand, indicating the mysterious submersible's approximate depth, was slowly moving.

"He's sinking—whatever he is," Keith muttered to Hemmy. "Hey, Sparks! Get me Captain Knapp."

A moment later the connection was put through.

"Bob? This is Wells again. Bob, our location chart shows the presence of some strange undersea metallic body. It can't be a submarine, for my maritime reports would show its presence. We think it has some connection with the 'machine-fish' that survivor raved about. At any rate, I'm going after it. The world has a right to know what destroyed that fishing fleet, and since the *NX-1* is right on the spot it's my duty to track it down. Re-broadcast this news to land stations, will you? I'll keep in touch with you."

Knapp's voice came soberly back. "I guess you're right, Keith; it's up to you.... So long, old man. Good luck!"

In Wells' veins throbbed the lust for action. With control studs at hand, location chart and televue screen before his eyes and fifteen men waiting below for his commands, he had no fear of any monster the underseas might spew up. He glanced swiftly at the location chart and depth indicator again.

The mysterious red spot was slowly coming across the *NX-1*'s bows at a distance of about one mile. Keith punched a stud, and, as his craft filled her tank and slipped down further into deep water, he spoke to Hemmy Bowman.

"Take control for a minute. Keep on all speed, and follow 'em like a bloodhound. I'm going below."

He strode down the connecting ramp to the lower deck, where he found fifteen men standing vigilantly at posts. At once Keith plunged into a full explanation of what he had learned up in the control room. He concluded:

"A great moral burden rests on us—every one of us—as we will soon come face to face with a possible

world menace. Anything may happen. A state of war exists on this submarine. You will be prepared for any wartime eventuality!"

Sobered faces greeted this announcement, and perceptibly the men straightened and held themselves more alertly. Wells at once returned to the control room. A glance at the location chart and its two tiny lights told him that the intervening distance had been decreased to about half a mile.

The depth dial showed them both to be two miles below, and steadily diving lower. Charts showed the sea-floor to be three miles deep in this position, and that meant—

"Look there!" exclaimed the first officer suddenly. "It's changing course!"

The crimson stud had suddenly shifted its course, and now was fleeing directly before them. For a moment the distance between the green and red lights remained constant—and then Keith Wells stared

unbelievably at the chart, wiped a hand across his eyes and stared again.

"Why—why, the devils are as fast as we!" he exclaimed in amazement. "I think they're even gaining on us!"

"And there's no other submarine in the world that can do more than thirty under water!" Hemmy Bowman added. "We're hitting a full forty-one!"

A call came through the communication tube from Sparks. "Report from Consolidated Radio News-Broadcasters, sir, aimed especially at us."

"Well?" asked Keith, motioning Hemmy to listen in. Sparks read it.

"A week ago Atlantic City reported that seven men were snatched off fishing boat by unidentified tentacled monsters. Testimony of witnesses was discredited, but was later corroborated by the almost identical testimony of other witnesses at Brighton Beach, England, who saw man and woman taken by

mysterious monsters whilst bathing.' Perhaps these same creatures destroyed the Newfoundland fishing fleet." His level voice ceased.

"Tentacled monsters ... 'machine-fish,'" Wells murmured slowly. "'Machine-fish.'..."

Their eyes met, the same wonder in each. "Well," Keith rapped at last, "we're seeing this through!"

He turned again to the location chart. The green spot as always was in the center, and at a constant distance was the red, showing that the *NX-1* was hot on the other's trail. The depth dials indicated that both were diving deeper every moment.

"Where in hell's it going?" the commander rasped. "We'll be on the floor in a few minutes!"

Here the televue showed the world to be one of fantasy, one to which the sun did not exist. It was not an utter, pitchy blackness that pervaded the water, but rather a peculiar, dark blueness. No fish schools, Keith noted, scurried from them. They had already

left these waters; aware, perhaps, of the passing Terror....

They plunged lower yet. Wells was conscious of Hemmy Bowman's quick, uneven breathing. Conscious of the tautness of his own nerves, strung like quivering violin strings. Conscious of the terrific walls of water pressing in on them. And conscious of the men below, their lives bound implicitly in his will and brain....

A thought came to him, and quickly he reached into a rack for the chart of the local sea-floor. His brow creased with puzzlement as he studied it.

"Here's more mystery, Hemmy," he muttered. "Look—there's an underwater cliff about half a mile dead ahead. It rises to within four thousand feet of the surface. And that thing out there is charging straight into its base!"

"They must be aware of it," jerked the other. "See?—they've stopped!"

It was true. The gulf between the two colored spots was rapidly being swallowed up. At a pulsing forty-one knots the *NX-1* was closing in on the motionless mystery craft.

"They're sinking to the floor itself," observed Wells. "Perhaps waiting to attack."

The invisible beams from their ultra-violet light-beacons streamed through the silent gloom outside, yet still the televue screen was empty. Keith punched a stud, and the *NX-1*'s whining motors dulled to a scarcely audible purr.

"What is the thing?" muttered Hemmy Bowman. "God, Keith, what *is* it?"

For answer, the commander dropped them the last five hundred feet. The sea-floor rose like a gray ghost. More control studs were pushed; the order-board below read: "All Power Off, Rest in Trim." The location chart told a tale that wrung a gasp from Bowman's throat. The red and green lights were practically touching....

The hands of Petty Officer Brown, the helmsman, were quivering on the helm. Wells' fists kept tensing and relaxing as he peered for a sight of the enemy in the televue. Nothing showed but the moving fingers of spectral kelp. Then both he and Bowman cried out as one:

"There!"

Chapter 2: The Silent Ray

A strange shape had suddenly materialized on the screen—an immense, oval-shaped thing of dull metal, with great curving cuts of glass-like substance in its blunt bow, like staring eyes; a lifeless, staring thing, stretching far into the curtain of gloom behind. How long it was, Keith could not tell; at first his numb brain refused to grasp it and reduce it to definite, sane standards of size and length. The cold weeds of the sea-floor kelp beds swayed eerily over and around it. From its bow, he saw, peculiar knobs jutted, the function of which he guessed with dread.

Was it waiting with a purpose? Was it waiting—and inviting attack?

A frightened whisper from Hemmy Bowman broke the hush:

"Keith, the thing has ports, but shows no lights! What kind of creatures can they be?"

As he spoke, the three men in the control room felt the unmistakable, jarring tingle of an electric shock. And while their nerves still jumped, it came again; and again. They were conscious of a slight feeling of drowsiness.

Keith gaped at Bowman and Brown, and then a flash on the televue screen drew his eyes. There, against the blackness of its otherwise inanimate hulk, one of the jutting knobs on the bow of the mysterious submarine was glowing and pulsing with orange life! With it came the tingling shock again. It flicked off as they watched, then returned and went once more.

"They're attacking, but thank God the shock was harmless!" Wells said grimly. "All right; they've asked for it: I'm going to see how they like the taste of a torpedo!"

The two submarines were resting on the ocean floor with perhaps two hundred feet between them. The *NX-1*'s bow tubes were not exactly in line to score a direct hit; she would have to be maneuvered slightly

to port. The range was short; the explosion from the torpedoes would be titanic.

Keith punched the control studs, ordering the men below to assume firing stations. Then, while waiting for the *NX-1* to shift, he studied the televue screen to sight the range exactly. The black dot which represented the enemy craft was not directly on the crossed hair-lines of the dial-like range-finder, but shifting the *NX-1* a few feet would bring it to the perfect firing point.

But the *NX-1* did not budge.

Surprised, her commander swung and looked at Bowman. "What the devil?" he cried. "Did that shock —?" He left the dread thought unfinished and leaped to the speaking tubes.

"Craig! Jones! Wetherby!" he yelled. "Men! Don't you hear me? Aren't you—"

He broke off, wordless, waiting for an answer that did not come, then sprang to the connecting ramp and ran to the deck below.

The scene he found halted him abruptly in his tracks. Every member of the crew was sprawled on the deck, in grotesque, limp postures. They had been standing rigidly at posts, he saw, when the thing, whatever it was, had struck. Without a sound, without a single cry of alarm, the *NX-1*'s crew had been laid low!

The commander slowly advanced to the deck and stared more closely at the upturned faces around him. He saw that every man's eyes were open.

Bending over one still form, he pressed his hand on the heart. It was beating! The man was alive!

Amazed, he moved to another and another: they were all breathing, slowly and regularly—were all alive! A curious look in their eyes staggered him for a moment. He could swear that they recognized him, knew he was staring at them—for every single pair was alight with intelligence, and Keith fancied he saw gleams of recognition.

"It must have been a paralyzing ray!" he gasped. "A thing our scientists've been trying to develop for years.... And that monster outside knows the secret...." He lifted an arm of the inert figure at his feet; when he released the grip, it flopped limply back to the deck again.

"Keith! Come back, quick!"

Startled, the commander turned to find Hemingway Bowman at the top of the connecting ramp, his face distorted with alarm.

"For God's sake, come back quick!" he yelled again.

"Down there the ray might get you!"

With the words, Wells leaped to the ramp and raced to the control room. He had no sooner made it than he felt again the queer tingle of the electric charge. He found himself trembling. Bowman's face was white. His words came stuttering.

"One second later and they'd have got you.... They got Sparks in his cubby.... You see, the ray doesn't affect us in the control room because—"

"Because the Gibson insulation that protects the instruments keeps it out!" Keith finished grimly. "I see!"

Just then a slight jar ran through the submarine. Coincident with it came a cry from Brown, the helmsman. His arm was pointed at the televue.

There they saw the enemy's mighty dirigible of metal was now within thirty feet of the *NX-1*. It had crept up silently, without warning. And, spanning the short gulf between them, an arm of webbed metal craned from the other's huge bow, hooking tightly into the American submarine's forward hawser holes!

As they took this in, the enemy ship moved away and the arm of metal tightened. The *NX-1* shuddered. And, at first slowly, but with ever increasing speed, she got under way and slid after her captor. They were being towed away. Kidnaped! Men, submarine and all!

Keith Wells mopped sweat from a hot brow and rapidly reviewed his weapons. He was sorely restricted. Through an emergency system the *NX-1* could be propelled and maneuvered from her control room; but the torpedo tubes needed local attendance.

"Hemmy, reverse engines," he jerked, himself spinning over a small wheel. "Let's see if we can out-pull the devil!"

At once they felt the shock of the paralyzing ray, and then the surging whine of the Edsel electrics pulsed up and in the televue screen they watched the grim struggle of ship against ship.

Imperceptibly, almost, as her screws cut in and churned, the forward progress of the *NX-1* was slowing, the speed of the other being cut down, until finally they but barely forged ahead. Slowly, ever so slowly they were out-pulled; inch by inch they were dragged ahead. Their motors could not hold even.

"She's more powerful than we!" Wells' bitter voice spoke. "Damn!" He thought desperately, while

Bowman and Brown stared at the fantastic tale the televue spelled out.

Again the paralyzing shock tingled, an intangible jailer that bound them, more surely than steel bars, to the control room. To dare that streaming barrage meant instant impotence, and perhaps, later, death....

"Our two bow torpedoes," Keith mused slowly. "We're a bit close, but it's our only chance. The ray comes at intervals of about a minute; the torps are ready for firing. If one of us could dash forward and discharge 'em.... Brown, that's you!"

The petty officer met his commander's gaze levelly. He smiled. "Yes, sir, I'm ready!" he said.

"Good! It'll have to be quick work, though; I'll try and keep the sub pointed straight. Wait for the ray, then run like hell!"

The first officer took over the helm and Brown stepped to the forward ladder, waiting for the periodic ray to be discharged.

The odd tingle came and vanished. "Now!" Wells roared, and Brown leaped down the thin steel rungs.

He staggered at the bottom from the force of his impact, then straightened and raced madly forward. Through the drone of the motors the two officers could hear the staccato beat of his feet.

But their eyes were glued to the televue. Through clutching beds of seaweed the enemy submarine was ploughing. Her great, smooth bow lay straight ahead, metal hawser arm spanning the thirty feet between them. In another second, Keith thought grimly, two dynamite packed tubes of sudden death would thunderbolt into that hull, and—

Brown pulled the lever.

The tubes spat out compressed air; a scream ran through the submarine; and the two steel fish leaped from their sheaths, their tiny props roaring. Over the narrow gulf they shot; the range was short, their target dead ahead—and yet by bare inches they missed!

No answering roar bellowed back. Keith had watched their course; had seen them flash by the enemy's bow, flicking it with their rudders, but nothing more.

"Why?" he cried. And, as Bowman moved his hands in a hopeless gesture, he saw in the televue the reason.

It was a jagged pinnacle of rock, which, just before Brown had fired, had been straight ahead. The towing monster had seen it and veered sharply to avoid crashing. The barest change of course, yet sufficient to avoid the torpedoes....

Wells and Bowman were cursing savagely when the sound of Brown, racing desperately aft, jerked the commander to the ladder. He saw the petty officer at its foot. "Hurry!" Wells shouted. "The ray!"

Brown grasped the steel rungs and scrambled upward, but he was too late. The fatal charge tingled. A peculiar, surprised expression washed over his face; his hands loosened their grip. For a second his eyes looked questioningly at his commander; a faint sigh escaped him; and then his arms flung out, his body

relaxed, and he slumped like a slab of meat to the deck below....

Keith Wells saw red. Blind to everything, he was just about to charge down the ladder to himself re-load the forward tubes when the grip of Hemmy Bowman's hand stayed him. The thing Hemmy was staring at in the televue screen sobered him completely.

The wall of rock to which the enemy submarine had first been charging had become visible, soaring vastly from the gloom of the sea-floor. And the monster was towing them straight into a dark, jagged cleft at its base.

"It's a cavern!" Keith breathed. "A split in the rock—the lair of that devil. And we're being dragged into it!"

Chapter 3: Sacrifice

At that moment Keith Wells knew fear. Each second they were being hauled closer to the monster's dim lair. It lay there, dark, mysterious, fingered by gently swaying, clammy kelp. A hushed solitude seemed to reign over it, aweing all undersea life from the vicinity.... Wells turned his head to meet Bowman's eyes, and read in them a silent question.

What now?

He groaned in the agony of his mind. In a few minutes, all would be over. Once the *NX-1* was dragged into that dark cavern there'd be no chance of escaping to warn the world above, of saving the submarine. What now? The question brought beads of sweat to his tormented brow. He, Keith Wells, standing impotently by while his ship, the pride of the service, was hauled inch by inch to some strange doom!

Racked by these thoughts, he murmured tortured, jerky phrases, unconscious he was giving voice to the things that flogged his brain.

"What can I do? I've got to save my ship—I've got to get back to break the news—I've got to tell the world! But how? How—" His expression changed suddenly. "That's it! That hawser arm between us must be broken!"

"Yes."

First Officer Hemingway Bowman's clear voice broke in on the older man's thoughts with that one crisp word. Keith swung to find the other's eyes fixed levelly on his.

"You're right, Keith. The hawser arm must be broken; with a depth charge, of course. It's the only way.

"To attach a depth charge," he continued evenly, "a man must leave the ship. You can't, Keith. It will be me."

The commander did not speak. "I'll put on a sea-suit," Hemmy went on quickly, eyes lighting. "You tip the submarine and I'll slide out the conning tower exit port on the lee side, so they can't see me, and worm forward through the kelp. We're almost holding them even; that'll be easy. I'll be protected from the paralyzing shock until the last second, and it may not get me outside; that'll have to be chanced. The hawser arm's only some ten feet above the sea-floor; I can reach it with a hook on the charge." He paused.

"I'll attach it; and when it bursts I'll try to get back and grab that ring on the midships exit port, and you can let me in when we get to the surface. But if I take too long, Keith—if I miss—you beat it without me. You understand? Beat it!"

He gazed straight at his friend. "Understand, Keith?"

Commander Keith Wells bowed his head in acquiescence. He was afraid that if he met Hemmy Bowman's steady eyes he'd make a fool of himself....

Hemmy glanced at the screen once more, shivering as he saw how near the black cavern was. Then he moved rapidly, playing the cards carefully for his gamble with death. He had to: the trumps were in the other hand.

From the locker where their sea-suits were stowed he grabbed his own, and with quick fingers ripped the slides and fitted it on. A sheath of yellow Lestofabrik, its weighted feet and gleaming casque transformed his slim figure into a giant such as might stalk through a nightmare. Built cunningly into the helmet was a tiny radio transmitter and receiver, with a range of a quarter-mile; hugging to the shoulders, inside nestled the air-making mechanism, its tiny generators already in motion. Around the helmet was fastened a small removable undersea-light. The wrists of the suit were very flexible, permitting the freest motion.

Once in the suit, Hemmy smiled through the still-opened face-shield.

"Got the depth charge ready, Keith? Make it fast—that cavern's near!... Good!"

Silently the commander fitted the black bomb to his friend's shoulders. It was timed to fire a minute after being set. A long wire hook craned from its top, and this hook Bowman would fasten on the hawser arm.

"Without Sparks, I guess I'll have to communicate with you through portable," Keith said, and quickly donned one of the tiny portable sets.

"Right. Ready, Keith."

Bowman started his awkward, crawling progress up the ladder into the conning tower just above, Keith helping from behind. When they stood before the exit port on the lee side, Wells shot back its bolts and the door swung open, revealing the black emptiness of the water chamber. The commander gazed for a second into Bowman's eyes. The moment had come.

Keith turned his head away, felt a hand grip his. He wrung it tightly....

Bowman clumped into the chamber.

The commander closed and locked the door, and he heard the streaming water pour in as Hemmy turned the valve. Then Wells sped down the ladder and tilted the diving and course rudders of the submarine.

She swayed daintily over to port; held there. A moment later the recurring electric tingle brushed him. Had the enemy seen Bowman leave? Had the ray struck him down?

He glared into the televue. "Thank God!" he breathed. For Hemmy had already slid down the *NX-1*'s smooth hull and was safe on the sea-floor beside her.

"Everything right?" Wells asked, speaking into the microphone of his portable.

"All O.K.," came the answer. "Going forward now. Kelp thick as hell."

Keith's eyes bored at the screen. This misshapen monster who was his friend! Almost obscured by bands of thick-leaved kelp the yellow form moved, hands clearing a pathway through the weeds. Slowly but surely he made for the bow of the submersible.

"Hard going, Keith. God—the cavern's right ahead!"

It was ghostly to hear Hemmy's warm voice from the lifeless solitude outside. Breath coming quickly, Wells watched the silent scene—the cleft in the wall of rock overshadowing everything now. The diver fought ahead, gaining inch by inch.

Now, save for occasional clumps of weed, he was exposed to the enemy.... Now the last desperate gauntlet was reached.... Keith felt his blood pound hotly.

"I'm gaining, Keith. Gaining...."

Bowman had little breath for speech. His tiny form battled on, now sinking from sight as he dropped into

some masked gully, now wrestling slowly with great swaying strands of kelp, but always struggling ahead.

"I'm at the bow, Keith! The hawser arm's right in our mooring holes. I'll go halfway before fastening the charge. Any signs of life from the devil?"

"None yet, Hemmy. But go slow. Hide all you can, old man, for God's sake!..."

Right beneath the metal arm, Bowman's dwarfed figure crept doggedly ahead. Forward, inch by breathless inch. Kelp thickened, washed away; the two hulking submersibles, captor and captive, surged onward—but just a little faster went the valiant figure with the black charge on its back.

The towing monster had its snout in the cavern. The darkness thickened. Bowman was quarter way!

He plunged desperately. Half way!

"I'm there, Keith! Now for it!"

"Oh, God!" Wells cried. "They see you; they're coming!"

For he had seen strange shapes leaving the enemy submarine.

And at that same moment, Bowman saw them, too.

They came like the blink of a dark eye from a door that had quickly slid open in the mysterious ship's bow. As tall as a man they were, and there were two of them, though at first the nature of their bodies merged with the wreathing kelp made them seem like a dozen. Bowman stared at them, hypnotized with fear. His legs and arms went dead, and his whole gallant spirit seemed to slump into lifeless clay. Now he knew why the fishermen had shrieked "machine-fish." Each one of them had eight tapering arms, eight restless tentacles. These were octopi, most hideous scavengers of the ocean floor! And not only octopi—but octopi sheathed in metal-scaled armor!

As they came closer, he realized this preposterous fact. The dark substance of their writhing tentacles

was not flesh: it was a coat of metal scales. And the fat central mass which held their eyes and vital organs and beaked jaw—this mass was completely enveloped by a globe of glass. From inside, he could see great eyes staring at him. The monsters came towards him quite slowly, obviously wary, advancing over the sea-floor in what was a hideous mockery of walking, their forward tentacles outstretched.

With a sob, Hemmy Bowman pulled himself from his trance. He glanced back at the *NX-1*. He still had time to retreat. He might be able to get back inside before these monsters seized him.

But that meant abandoning his job. And already his own submarine was nosing into the cavern. The choice between the octopi and retreat stared him in the face. He pulled himself together and jerked his arms back to action.

Eyes bulging, Keith Wells peered at the dim televue screen. He saw the creatures approaching Hemmy. And then, suddenly, he remembered his radiophone.

"Hemmy! Come back, for God's sake!" he cried.

"Come back while you can—it's hopeless!"

But Bowman had already seized the depth charge from his back and hooked it on the hawser arm above.

Immediately, with that action, all caution fled from the approaching monsters. Their tentacles whipped furiously; and in a great arc they sprang for the tiny figure of the diver.

With a deep breath, Hemmy staggered forward to meet them. "Keith!" he gasped. "I'll try to hold 'em away from the charge! When it bursts, zoom! Zoom like hell to the surface!" And then the tentacles had him.

Keith watched, cursing his impotence to help. Hemmy had no weapon; he was trying to hold them back by the weight of his body; he reached out and grasped a tentacle and hugged it to him, shoving forward with all his puny strength. But all his effort was as nothing. One of the octopi writhed past him and darted onto

the depth charge. Its tentacles tugged at the bomb; pulled furiously.

The time charge exploded. The *NX-1* rocked like a quivering reed; Wells was knocked violently to the floor; a vast roar smote his ear-drums. When he staggered to his feet he found that the octopus that was pulling at the charge had disappeared—blown into fragments of flesh and metal. But the hawser arm was broken! The *NX-1*, free, shot back a full fifty feet under the pull of her reversed screws. A cry echoed in her commander's ears:

"Go back, Keith! Go like hell!"

He saw the remaining octopus lift Bowman and whip to the exit port of its submarine. The lid slid into place, closing on the monster and his friend, and the enemy ship vanished into the black cavern....

Once clear of the opening, Keith set his motors full forward and brought the diving rudders up. Quickly the ship sped from the haunted sea-floor to the sun-

warmed surface. A last thin call rang in his radiophone:

"They've got me inside, Keith. It's dark, and filled with water. I can't see anything, but I—I guess we're going through the cavern.... Forget about me, old boy. So long! So—"

The voice was abruptly cut off.

Keith ripped the instrument from his head. Then, face white and drawn, he ran to the radio cubby. Standing over Sparks' inert body, he put through a call to Robert Knapp, on the *Falcon*.

"Knapp?" he said harshly. "This is Wells. I'll be with you in a few minutes. Yes—yes—I'll tell you the whole story later. But get this now: Have the day shift all ready to take over the submarine by the time I pull alongside."

He said no more just then; but rang off, and, looking back, he muttered savagely:

"But I'll be back, Hemmy—I'll be back!"

Chapter 4: In the Cavern

"That's the story, Knapp. They got Bowman, and I had to run away. Their ship disappeared into the cavern. I've got a hunch, though, that it's not just a cavern, but a tunnel, leading through to some underwater world. That series of sub-sea earthquakes probably opened it up; and now these devil-octopi are free to pour out. I've *got* to find out what's what, and that's why I'm going down again as soon as the torpedo system's ready!"

Keith and Robert Knapp were in the *Falcon's* chart room. On the table before them lay a broad white map with a cross-mark indicating the position of the mysterious dark cavern.

Wells was striding up and down like a caged tiger in his impatience to be off. Every other minute he glared down to where the *NX-1* lay alongside. On her conning tower stood the tall blond-haired figure of Graham, the first officer of the day shift, supervising the final details of the work of installing a system of

jury controls whereby the submarine's torpedoes could be fired from her control room.

Keith stopped short and faced Knapp. "It won't be so one-sided this time, Bob," he promised. "You see: when the location chart shows the enemy ship, I'll rush all men into the control room, where the paralyzing ray can't harm them. I don't know but what they have in other weapons, but I'm gambling on getting my torps in first. They've killed Bowman; they've ravaged a whole fishing fleet; they're free to emerge from their hole and maraud every ocean on the globe! They've got to be stopped! And since I'm armed and have the only submarine on the spot, I've got to do it! I know how to fight them now!"

Captain Robert Knapp's sense of things was badly disordered. He had just heard a story which his common sense told him couldn't be true, but which the evidence of his eyes had grimly authenticated. He had seen fifteen men slung aboard his ship from the *NX-1*'s silent hull; men stretched in grotesque, limp attitudes; men struck down by a paralyzing ray. Why, no nation on earth had developed rays for warfare!

Yet—a crew of helpless men was even then in the sick bay, receiving attention in the hope that they might recover.

"You're going right through that cavern, then, Wells?" he asked incredulously. "You're going to investigate what lies beyond?"

"Nothing else! And I won't come out till I've blown that octopi ship to pieces!"

"It sounds preposterous," Knapp murmured, shaking his head. "Octopi, you say—and clad in metal suits! Running a submarine more powerful than the *NX-1*! Armed with a ray—a paralyzing ray! I can't believe—I can't conceive—"

"You've seen the men!... Knapp, if I were you I'd swing my eight-inchers out, bring up the plane catapult and keep the deck torpedo tubes loaded and ready. It's best to be prepared; God knows what's going on underseas these days!"

First Officer Graham appeared at the door. "Work finished, sir," he said. "Ready to cast off."

"Thank heaven!" Wells muttered, and stretched out his hand to Robert Knapp. "Broadcast what I've told you, Bob, and say that the *NX-1* won't be back till everything's under control. I'll keep in touch with you. So long!" And he was gone before the captain could even wish him good luck.

Orders raced from her commander's fingers on the stud board in the control room. "Crash Dive" filled her tanks and put her nose perilously down, so that in thirty seconds only a swirling patch of water was left to show where once she'd lain. A brief command to the helmsman and she pointed straight for the dark cavern marked on the chart.

When well under way, Keith descended with Graham to inspect the new torpedo firing system, and found it in good working order. "Graham," he ordered tersely, "instruct the crew fully about rushing to the control room on one ring of the general alarm. And send the

cook up to me in a minute or so. I'll be in Sparks' cubby."

Above again, he instructed the radio man to rig a remote control sender and receiver in the insulated control room. The need for centering the whole crew there during engagements would crowd the room awkwardly, but at other times, while proceeding on their inspection of the cavern lair, they could remain at their regular posts.

That, at least, was Wells' plan.

He looked up and found the cook, McKegnie, grinning at him from the door of the control room. Keith smiled, running his eyes over the portly magnificence of his gently perspiring figure. "Keg," he said cheerfully, "I want you to move your hot plate and culinary apparatus up here; you see, we're all likely to be crowded in here for some time, and your coffee's going to be an absolute necessity." He couldn't resist a crack at McKegnie's well-known and passionate curiosity as to what made the thigmajigs of the control board work: "And besides, it'll give you a

chance to observe the instruments and perfect yourself for your future career as a naval officer. Much better than a correspondence course in 'How to Be a Submarine Commander,' eh?"

Cook McKegnie grinned sheepishly, and left. He was well used to such jests, but he never would admit that his extraordinary interest in watching the ship's wheels go round was accompanied by a miraculous inability to comprehend why they went round....

Fifteen minutes later the helmsman's cry, "Cavern showing, sir!" swung the commander to the televue screen. The dark, kelp-shrouded opening he knew so well was already looming on it. And he was prepared.

"Enter," he said, while his punched studs ordered, "Quarter Speed, Ready at Posts, Tanks in Trim." The *NX-1* slackened her gait, balanced cautiously, and struck a straight, even course as she crept closer to the cleft entrance through which, some two hours earlier, the octopi ship had nosed.

Screws turning slowly, she edged through the jagged cavern. Shades of inky blackness grew on the televue and danced in fantastic blotches; the screen turned to a welter of black, threatening shadows; became a useless maze of ever-changing forms. Keith mouthed curses as he stared at it; he now had nothing by which to judge his progress, to maneuver the submarine, save directional instruments and, perhaps, chance scrapings of the tunnel's ragged walls against the outer hull. The *NX-1* was running a gauntlet of immeasurable danger, her only assurance of success being the fact that a larger craft had preceded her.

But how far, Keith wondered, had that ship preceded her? How was he to know that it had gone straight through? There might be a dozen different turnings in this tunnel: the submarine could easily tilt head-on against a jagged rock and puncture her hull. There might be mines planted directly in their course; he might be swimming straight into some hideous ambushade.

He drove these thoughts from his mind. The passage had to be made on the fickle authority of the senses; and, realizing this, Wells took the helm into his own hands. Graham was posted at the location chart, with instructions to report the red light if it showed.

Down below, the Edsel electrics were humming very softly; the men stood vigilantly at posts. On their brows were little beads of sweat, and here and there a hand clenched nervously. All knew they were in a tight place; otherwise they were ignorant of where their commander was leading them. Occasionally a long, shivering rasp ran through the ship as her hull nudged the rough tunnel wall. Then the course rudders would swing gently over; and perhaps, almost immediately, another grinding cry of rock and steel would come from the other side. Then would come quickly indrawn breaths as the rudders swung again and the humming silence droned on.

The scrapings came quite often. Often, too, the motors would go silent altogether, and the *NX-1* would rest almost motionless as her commander felt for an opening. It was a tense, nerve-wringing ordeal.

The silence, the waiting, the dainty scrapings were maddening.

Keith Wells' skin was prickling. He kept only fingertips on the tiny helm: he was playing that uncanny sixth sense of the submarine commander. When it misled him, the rasping rock groaned out, scarring the submarine's smooth skin. Generally, the tunnel was straight; but each time he heard his ship rub against some exterior obstruction, his teeth went tight—for who knew but what it might be a mine?

They had penetrated perhaps a half-mile when Graham, eyes steady on the televue, reported: "Light growing, sir!"

Wells saw that the screen was filling with a soft, faintly glowing bluish color. The walls of the tunnel became visible, and he noted that they were widening out, funnel-like. He dared to increase speed slightly. Three minutes later he saw that the blue illumination was seeping from the end of the tunnel. They continued out.

"Thank God, we're through!" he muttered to Graham. "You see, I was right! It's an underground sea—and we're at the top of it." For the instruments indicated a depth beneath them of roughly three miles. They were in, evidently, a large cavern, of vast length and depth.

The *NX-1* continued slowly forward, two pairs of eyes intent on her televue screen. Keith jotted down the tunnel's position, and the funnel-shaped hole sank away behind their slow screws. And then, upon the location chart, a faint red dot suddenly glowed!

It was upon them in a flash. A small tube of metal, shaped somewhat in the form of the big octopi submarine, had darted up from below, hovered a second close to them, and then, almost before they realized they were being surveyed, sped back into the mysterious depths from which it had come.

"A lookout, I suppose," Keith muttered, breathing more easily. "Couldn't have held more than two of those creatures.... Well, the alarm's out, I guess,

Graham, but it can't be helped. Let's see what it's like down below."

They plunged steadily down, then ahead. And presently there grew on the televue vague forms which widened their eyes and made their breath come quicker. Keith had guessed the tunnel led to a civilization of some kind, but he was not prepared for the sight that loomed hazily through the soft blue water.

Strange, moundlike shapes appeared far below, mounds grouped in orderly rows and clusters, with streets running between them, thronged with tiny, spidery dots. Octopi! It was, the commander realized, a city of the monsters—a complete city like those of surface peoples! For several miles in every direction the water-city spread out, farther than the televue could pierce. Wells marveled at this separately developed civilization, this deep-buried realm of octopi whose unexpected intellectual powers had permitted such development. Perhaps, he pondered, this city was only one of many; perhaps only a village. He could but vaguely glimpse the queer mound

buildings, but saw that they were of varying height and were filled with dark round entrance holes, through which the creatures streamed on their different errands....

He saw no schools of fish around. "I guess they're been all killed off, or eaten," he commented to the wonder-struck Graham. "Probably the octopi have separate hatcheries where they raise them for food."

"But—good Lord!" the first officer exclaimed. "A city—a city like ours! Down here, filled with octopi!..."

"Yes," answered Wells grimly, "and this 'city' may only be a small settlement; there may be scores of these places. We'd better continue ahead now that we're here; for we've got to get all the information we can. I only hope these monsters haven't more than one big submarine. We can expect an attack any minute...."

The *NX-1* pressed on. The city dropped behind. A breathless tenseness had settled down over the submarine; she was proceeding with utmost caution, her anxious officers alert at the location chart. The

great fear that tormented them was that they might be attacked, not by one, but by a fleet of the octopi ships....

Then, at the rim of the chart, a red dot appeared! It grew rapidly, charging down on them at great speed. The spot was large; this was no small sentry boat! At once the alarm bell shrilled its warning; the crew below left their posts and raced to the control room. With sure mechanical fingers the emergency system gripped the valve handles and motor levers; Keith swung the *NX-1* onto a level keel, straightened her out, and decreased speed still more. Giving the rods of the motor and rudder controls to Graham, he moved to the small lever which would unleash his bow torpedoes, and fingered it lightly. The *NX-1* was ready for action.

Scarcely had the men reached the small control room than the familiar electric charge tingled. They stared wonderingly at each other, half afraid. No one seemed hurt. One hand on the torpedo lever, Wells watched his charts and instruments. He thanked God that there was only one of the enemy.

The ray's shock came again—and stronger. The red dot was practically upon them. The screen was still empty. Coolly, Keith slowed the submarine to a dead stop. The crimson stud came closer....

And then he saw it. It was the same fearsome, hulking form. The same curving windows, dark and lifeless. The same knobs on its bow, one now leaping and pulsing with the paralyzing glow. At a distance of a few hundred feet the octopi ship swerved to a halt, dousing the NX-1 with its ray unceasingly. Again those two underwater craft, so oddly contrasted, were face to face. And again the weapon that had once struck the American ship's crew down at their posts was directed full onto the *NX-1*.

But it was harmless! It merely tingled, and did not paralyze! The control room sheathing held it out stoutly. The men's faces showed overwhelming relief.

Keith smiled grimly. Now, at least, he had the devils where he wanted them; now it was his turn to strike with a—to them—terrible, mysterious weapon. They had attacked; had failed—and now he could square up

for Hemmy and send a pair of torpedoes into that ship of hideous tentacles.

"Port five!" The ship swerved slightly. "Hold even!" The enemy craft was very close. The *NX-1*'s bow tubes were sighted in direct line. Her torpedoes could not possibly miss. This time, destruction for the octopi ship was inevitable....

Keith Wells gripped the lever that held the torps in leash.

"*Wait!*"

Sparks, a bare foot from him, yelled out the word. Wells, alarmed, released his grip on the knob. The radio operator was listening intently, a circle of taut faces around his crouched back. He swung excitedly around.

"For God's sake, don't fire!" he cried. "Hemingway Bowman's on that submarine! He's alive—and calling for you!"

Chapter 5: The Other Weapon

Bowman—alive!

Keith Wells let go the torpedo lever. His whole orderly plan of action was crashed in a second.—For an instant he stood gaping at the radio man, forgetful of the peril outside, striving desperately to hit on some way of surmounting this unlooked-for obstacle. The idea of firing on his friend—killing Hemmy Bowman with his own hand—paralyzed his brain.

And in that unguarded instant the octopi struck.

From the bow of the enemy submarine, slanting from another of its peculiar knobs, a narrow beam of violet light poured, cutting a vivid swathe across the televue. The huddled men stared at it, not comprehending what it was. They felt no shock of electricity, nor could they discern any other harmful effect. The ray held steadily on their bow, not varying in the slightest, for a full thirty seconds. And still none of them could feel or see any damage.

Wells, however, gradually became aware that he was bathed in perspiration, that great streams of sweat were coursing down his face. A quick glance told him that every member of the crew was the same way; and then, suddenly, he was conscious of a wave of intense heat—heat which quickly became terrific. The control room was stifling!

Before he could act, the *NX-1* slipped sharply to one side. A sharp hissing sound grew at her bow, climbing steadily to a shriek. Long streamers of white steam crept along the lower deck and seeped up into the control room. And then rose the fatal sound of rushing water—water pouring into the submarine from outside!

For the violet beam was a heat ray—a weapon surface civilizations had not yet developed. While the *NX-1*'s crew had stared at it in the televue, it had melted a hole in their bow.

Immediately the submarine lost trim, and the deck tilted ominously. In the face of material danger—

danger from a source he understood—the commander became cool and methodical.

"Sea-suits on!" he snapped. "Then forward and break out steel collision-mat and weld it in place! Every man! You, too, Sparks and McKegnie!"

"But—but, sir!" stammered Graham. "Do you want them to get us with their paralyzing ray?"

"You'd rather drown?" Wells flung back. Silenced, the first officer donned his sea-suit, and in thirty seconds the rest of the crew had theirs on and were cluttering clumsily forward.

Alone in the control room, Keith battled with the unbalancing flow of water, maneuvering with all his skill in a futile attempt to keep the *NX-1* on even keel. The men forward worked with great speed, spurred on by the realization that they were fighting death itself, but even as they labored the submarine swung in ever increasing rolls and dips; the great weight of water she had shipped slopped back and forth; her bow went steadily down. Keith swept her forward

tanks clean of water, always conscious of the immobile, staring octopi submarine in the teleview, watching them, it seemed, curiously, and not driving home their advantage with additional bolts of the violet heat ray.

Despite her commander's frantic efforts, the *NX-1* fluttered down remorselessly; the cavern floor rose, and, sinking with them, came the octopi craft, in slow mockery of a fighting plane pursuing its stricken foe to the very ground....

She struck bottom with a soft, thudding jar, and settled on even keel. At once Wells released the helm, jumped into his own sea-suit and stumbled down to take command.

He found the steel collision-mat in place, and the welding of it nearly completed. A few feathery trickles of water still seeped through on each side, but under his terse directions the pumps were soon draining it out. The weird figures of the crew in their sea-suits looked like creatures from another planet as they rapidly finished the job.

"All right—up to the control room, everybody! Fast!" Wells roared.

The men stumbled aft as rapidly as they could in their cumbersome suits. Several were already on the ladder. A few feet further—

But at that moment the paralyzing ray again stabbed into the ship—and Keith Wells slumped helplessly to the deck. And as he crumpled, he glimpsed the grotesque, falling figures of his men, and saw one come tumbling down the ladder from the control room, where he had almost reached safety....

Peculiar sensations, unendurable thoughts raced through the commander as he lay there limply. He knew his predicament. He wanted desperately to rise, to rush to the control room. Time and time again in those first few moments of impotence he strove mightily to pull his limbs back to life. But his greatest efforts were barren of result, save to leave him feeling still weaker. The fate that he had seen strike down Brown now enmeshed him. He was paralyzed. Helpless. In the midst of his crew.

After a moment all sensation left his body. His limbs might not have existed. Sensation, pain, lived only in his brain—and there it was terrible, because self-created.

He found himself sprawled flat on his back, his eyes directed stiffly upward. He could not move them, but out of the corners he vaguely sensed the other figures around him. Helpless, every one! And who knew if they would ever come out of the spell! Victory had gone to the octopi....

Minutes that seemed like hours passed. And then a well-remembered voice sounded in the radio earphones in his helmet. It was Hemmy Bowman, speaking from the enemy ship.

"Keith! Keith Wells! Are you there?" the voice cried.
"Keith! What have they done to you?"

And Keith, he could not answer! He could not answer that troubled voice of his friend—that voice from a friend he had thought dead.

Again Bowman spoke. "Keith! Can't you hear me? What are they doing to you? Oh—" For a moment it stopped, then came once more, thick with anguish. "Oh, God, what's happened?" Then lower: "If only there were light, so I could see what they're doing...." The voice tapered into silence. Keith could picture Hemmy, probably bound, giving him up for dead....

Then, quite distinctly, he heard a clank at the *NX-1's* bow! The submarine jerked, her bow tilted up—and with increasing speed she moved forward, silently as a ghost.

Keith thought he knew what that meant. The octopi ship had grasped them with another of its hawser arms, and was pulling them away. But where to? One of those mound cities? His brain was a turmoil as he tried to imagine what was before them. But all he could do was lie there and wait.

The American craft was towed for perhaps ten minutes—ten ages to her commander—then coasted slowly to a pause, and with a sharp jar settled into

rest. As she did so, every light in her hull went suddenly out.

It had been bad enough with the lights on, but the darkness was far worse. The submarine was a tomb—as silent as one, and full of men who lived and yet were dead. Hemmy Bowman's voice came no more to Wells. He was alone with his moiling doubts and fears and unanswerable questions, and he knew that every other man there was alone with them, too....

As his eyes became partially accustomed to the darkness, he could distinguish vaguely the forms of the familiar mechanisms above him. A slight noise grew suddenly and resolved itself into a prolonged scraping along the outer hull of the submarine. At intervals it paused and gave way to a series of sharp, definite taps.

Keith realized what those sounds signified: the octopi were striving to find some entrance to the *NX-1*! This, he told himself, was the end. The creatures would break through; water would rush in, and every man

would drown. For the face-shields of their sea-suits were open!

The dull scrapings ran completely around the motionless submarine, punctuated with the same staccato tappings. By the movement of the sound, Wells realized the octopi were approaching the lower starboard exit port. And as they neared that port, the noise abruptly stopped.

Then for some minutes silence fell. Next, the commander heard what was unmistakably the exit port's water chamber being filled—and a moment later emptied again. The devilish creatures had solved the puzzle of the means of entrance!

In the awful darkness the inner door of the port swung open. A slow, slithering sound came to Wells' ears. He sensed, though he could not see, the presence of alien creature. An odor struck his nostrils—that of fish....

A deliberate something crawled directly across one outstretched arm, and another across his legs. And

above him loomed a monstrous, complicated shadow, which, after a moment, slowly melted from his line of vision. Panicky, he strove again to bring his limbs back to life, but still could not....

Keith knew that in the darkness which their huge unblinking eyes could penetrate they were inspecting the *NX-1*'s interior, examining the men stretched on its deck, feeling them with their cold metal-scaled tentacles. Another complicated shadow crept back over the commander's line of sight, and from all around rose the slithering, shuffling tread of the octopi's many tentacles, rasping on the steel flooring.

Sweat from Wells' forehead trickled down and stung his eyes as he lay in that dark agony. There seemed to be countless investigating tentacles feeling through the entire submarine. One of them, iron-hard, suddenly coiled under his armpit and lifted him lightly as a feather from the deck. Another snaked up and clicked his face-shield securely shut. Keith heard other clicks, and knew that the shields of his men were likewise being closed.

The commander was held straight out from the octopus' revolting body, and as he swung, helpless, he could see that more men were grasped similarly in other mighty arms. Dangling in the shadow-filled darkness he was carried slowly to the exit port, and he heard the inner door swing open, then close again. Water streamed through the valves; it encompassed him with a feeling of lightness, a feeling of floating, as he swung at the end of the long metal-sheathed tentacles. A moment later a soft bluish glow burst on his vision, and he saw that he was outside. There was a long wait, and when the current next swung him around he was dismayed to see that every one of the monstrous creatures near him was dangling on high two or three men of his helpless crew. The whole outfit was in the power of the devil-fish!

And then their captors moved forward with them on a ghastly march of triumph....

But Keith Wells did not know that, crouched behind the instrument panel in the control room, shivering and sick with fear, was the plump form of Cook Angus

McKegnie, who had just gained it just before the paralyzing ray had struck.

Chapter 6: The Monster with the Armlets of Gold

Hemingway Bowman's ardent wish, after he was whipped quickly through the round exit port of the octopi submarine, was for a quick, clean death. The horror and mystery of his situation had left him with one conscious emotion, that he was afraid. The worst had been when he was hauled through the port; when, expecting anything, he had been able to see nothing in the dark, water-filled mystery ship.

Deliberate tentacles had stroked over every inch of his body—tentacles that were not metal-scaled, as had been the arms of the creature that captured him. It was then that he guessed the true purpose of the metal suits the octopi wore—to protect their bodies against the lesser pressure near the surface of the sea. Inside the submarine they did not need them. He decided that the ship was used for rapidly transporting large numbers of the octopi to distant regions, and also for a weapon of offense and defense. The intelligence of the cuttlefish astounded him.

Keith had got away. At least he knew that, and he thanked God for it. His bold stroke had not been in vain, his sacrifice not useless.

After the inspection of the tentacles, Hemmy had been shoved to a corner of the octopi submarine. He had felt cords wrapped around his body. After being thus secured, he was left to himself. He was utterly alone, except for strange, vague shadows that floated through the darkness—shadows that heated his brain as he realized how many of the devil-fish there were.

Hours that seemed like endless days passed.

Bowman concluded that the submarine had gone straight through the cavern and emerged finally into what seemed to be another sea. Dead silence filled the ship. What was happening, he could only guess. The craft seemed to run on forever. Never once did tentacles brush or inspect him again.

Finally the ship stopped, and a great round door opened in one wall. By the soft bluish glow that seeped in Hemmy caught a glimpse of his

surroundings, and his gorge rose at the sight. The ship was literally filled with a slowly waving forest of long black tentacles. Weird instruments, unlike anything he had ever seen, were grouped around the walls, and before them attendant octopi poised, their hideous eyes fixed and steady. There were no dividing decks as in the *NX-1*; the craft was one huge shell.

Then came furious activity. The door fell shut again, and the ship shot off at great speed. Hemmy felt sure that they were advancing to again attack the *NX-1*, and at once began to try to reach his comrades through radiophone. He knew that Wells would come back.

Finally he caught a human voice, and heard the *NX-1*'s radio operator shout to the commander that he, Bowman, was alive and calling. But when he tried to speak further, the American craft's radio was silent.

And then, in the octopi submarine, had come a soft glow of violet....

Was it a more deadly weapon than the paralyzing ray? In great suspense the prisoner waited. Silence—silence! Horrible doubts beset his mind. Was Keith refraining from firing his torpedoes because he, Bowman, was on board the enemy boat? The thought stung him. He tried desperately again to reach Wells; but there was no answer. Were the Americans dead?

Age-long minutes passed. Then the exit port opened and several metal-clad octopi swam out. Hemmy had a glimpse of the *NX-1* lying silent and apparently lifeless on the sea-floor, a gaping hole in her bow!

As if to taunt him with the sight, the creatures left the round door open, and presently Bowman beheld the octopi open the *NX-1*'s starboard exit port and enter. Later the port swung open again, and he saw the monsters emerge, each gripping several men clad in yellow sea-suits! That they were dead, or victims of the ray, was obvious from the way they limply dangled.

The exit port closed, and darkness filled the octopi ship. Hemmy Bowman panted with the futile effort to break his bonds.

"You devils!" he yelled in blind rage, exhausted. "Why don't you take me with them? Take me! Take me, damn your stinking hides!"

When Keith Wells was taken from the silent *NX-1*, a host of astounding impressions swarmed his brain. Swinging lightly at the end of his captor's tentacle, he strove as best he could, with eyes rigidly fixed straight ahead, to grasp his new surroundings. He had, first, one flash of the octopi ship lying quite close to them, its hulk, as always, immobile and apparently lifeless. And inside it, he was sure, was his friend and first officer, Hemmy Bowman—a captive.

He saw that the octopi submarine had towed the *NX-1* into one of the weird mound cities. His own ship was lying in what seemed a kind of public square, and crowds of black octopi were swarming around it as he and his crew were brought out. Shooting straight off the square ran one of the wide streets he had

previously seen from above, and on each side the brown mound-buildings rose. Their details were hazy, because of the cuttlefish inhabitants who swam thickly in front of them.

His captors started their march down this broad street. Great crowds of reddish-colored octopi clustered on each side of it; other swarms hung almost motionless—except for their constantly writhing tentacles—above, so that their line of progress was through what resembled a restless, living tunnel of repulsive black flesh, snaky arms and huge, unblinking eyes. Keith felt faint from the horror of it. Thousands of the monsters were there, all hanging in the soft, blue-glowing water; and occasionally, as he floated almost horizontally in his captor's firm grip, his legs would brush the wall of clammy flesh; or perhaps one of the tentacles would reach out as if to touch him.

The octopus that held him swam some five feet off the street bed itself; at intervals the thick swarm on either side would part for a second, and Keith could glimpse the huge mound-buildings, ever growing

larger, with round entrance holes dotted all over their smooth surface, above as well as the sides.

The march was ghastly. Their captors were taking them through the heart of the water-metropolis; displaying their human captives as did the Caesars in Roman triumphs of old!

The swarming crowds of tentacled monsters grew thicker as they progressed, and their tentacles began to whip more quickly, as if anger was burning in their loathsome bodies. Keith noted the menace of their sharp-beaked jaws, and the sickening sucker-discs on the livid under-side of the tentacles. As far as he could see, the swarms fell in behind the procession after it had passed. Following them—where?

Just as Wells felt himself on the verge of fainting, the procession turned to the right and entered the largest mound-building of all, a vast dome rising in the very center of the octopi metropolis. They continued through a corridor perhaps twenty feet high, from which at intervals other corridors branched. Held by one arm, and ever and again turning helplessly over

in his horizontal transit, Keith caught glimpses of walls covered with intricate designs on a basic eight-armed motif—designs of artistic value, that gave evidence of culture and civilization.

The passage ended as suddenly as it had begun, and they came into the main body of a gigantic building.

The commander could hardly credit his eyes. The place resembled a stadium, and was so vast that he felt dwarfed to nothingness. The domed roof soared far above in misty bluish light. On the floor, exactly beneath the center of the great dome, was a raised platform, and on it a dais resembling a very wide throne. Around the dais a score or more of octopi—officials, Keith supposed—were grouped.

Rapidly the creatures following the procession swam into the chamber. Monstrously large as the place was, the floor soon was filled with the thick flood of cuttlefish which swarmed in from many doors. Keith, held with the other captives just to one side of the hole he had entered by, began to think that they must soon refuse to let any more in—when, to his surprise,

he saw the latest arrivals begin to form a gallery twenty feet above those on the ground floor, and, when this was extended far back and completely filled, start yet another above it—and another, and another.... In ten minutes the mighty hall was crowded with countless layers of the cold-eyed monsters, each layer angling up from the central dais so that all could see.

"God!" the commander thought. "Nothing but solidly-packed devil-fish all the way to the dome! A slaughter pit! And we, of course, are to be the cattle!"

Minutes passed. The throne was still empty, and the thousands in the amphitheater seemed waiting for an occupant. Keith wished he was able to close his eyes. The restless, never-ceasing weaving of the countless tentacles in the levels above made the scene a nightmare. Some waved slowly, others whipped excitedly, but never for an instant did one pause. The movements were like the never-ceasing shifting and swaying of the trunks and feet of elephants; in the dim glow the huge chamber seemed to be filled with one fantastic, million-tentacled monster that stared

with its thousand eyes down on the forlorn group of puny human beings....

As if at a command the arms of the octopi on the platform suddenly began to weave in perfect unison in some weird ceremony. First they swayed out towards the waiting captives, then they swerved slowly to the empty throne. Then came a few quick, excited whippings; and once more the long arms reached out at the small group at the entrance. This went on for some minutes. Then, very suddenly, a creature swam up from what must have been an opening in the floor onto the dais-throne.

Keith saw it well.

It was an octopus, a giant amongst octopi, and Wells knew at once it was the ruler of the realm, the lord and master of the swarming galleries and the cities of mound-buildings.

It was larger than its fellows by a full three feet. And, encircling each great tentacle just where it joined the central mass of flesh, was a broad, glittering band of

polished gold—eight thick armlets that ringed the creature's revolting head-body with a circle of gleaming pagan splendor. Keith could almost fancy that a certain royal air hung over the monster.

The huge, unblinking eyes of the king stared at the horror-frozen captives. One long tentacle lifted slowly upward, and their captors at once started towards the throne with them. The score of octopi on each side stilled their weaving arms. A battery of emotionless eyes drilled into Wells' paralyzed body. He felt faint. Unquestionably the horrible ceremony was leading up to some form of cold-blooded sacrifice....

The monarch stretched a mighty arm towards Keith, and, as in a dream, he felt himself lifted out of his guard's grasp. The snakelike tentacle gripped him about the waist, and held him dangling like a puppet twenty feet in the water while the two deadly eyes stared steadily at him. He was brought closer, until the hideous central mass, with its cruel beaked jaw and ink sac hanging behind, was no more than a foot away.

Then another arm stroked slowly along the commander's helpless body. Once or twice it prodded sharply, and Wells felt a surge of fear, for his sea-suit might break. Deliberately the prying tentacle moved over him, delicately feeling his helmet, his weighted feet, his legs.

Keith Wells grew angry. He was being inspected like a trapped monkey! He, commander of the *NX-1*, representative of one of the world's mightiest nations—prodded and stared at by this fish, this octopus! A great rage suffused him, and with a terrific effort he tried to jab his arms into one of those devilish eyes. But try as he might, his body would not respond. He could not move a finger.

For a long time the loathsome inspection continued, until the monstrous king seemed satisfied. Wells was handed back. There followed an interminable period in which nothing whatever was done, as far as he could see. He was sure that they must be talking, debating, but no sound reached his ears through the tight helmet. All the time the endless motion in the swarming levels above went on. It became hazy,

dreamlike, and in spite of himself the commander began to feel drowsy. The weaving and swaying was producing a hypnotic effect. At last the desire to sleep grew overpowering.

Wells and his men were more than half unconscious when their original captors finally pulled them back from the royal presence and began a humble retreat from the throne room. Slowly they backed to the entrance. Keith's last drowsy glimpse was of a grotesque, gold-ringed monster on a throne, with a score of smaller tentacled creatures around him, and a vast haze of weaving tentacles and unblinking eyes above.

They passed from the huge chamber. The commander felt delirious, as in a nightmare, but he knew that they were again in the long corridor, and that their captors were taking them further into the mighty building, further from the street outside. He glimpsed great rooms branching off the corridor, and swarms of black octopi inside them. The light became fainter; and at last the procession turned into a separate, rough-walled chamber, dimly lit and empty.

Wells felt the grip around his arm loosen, and he floated limply to the floor among his men. He slept....

Chapter 7: The Glass Bell Jar

Keith awoke hours later.

Slowly he became conscious of a cramped, stiff body, of a dull pain racking his head. He stretched out his limbs—and, suddenly, realized he could move.

Remembering the paralyzing ray that had struck him down, and half afraid that his senses were tricking him, he kicked his left leg out. It moved with its old vigor. He quickly found that his strength had returned, that he could feel and move. The effect of the ray had worn off!

With a glow of new hope he rose to his feet and exercised numb muscles. Looking around, he saw the other men still stretched out on the floor of their rough-walled, watery prison. He called into his radiophone mouthpiece:

"Graham! Graham, wake up!" A grotesque figure stirred among its fellows; turned over. "It's Wells, Graham," Keith continued. "Get up; you can, now!"

And he watched the form of his big first officer stretch out and finally rise, while stupid, sleepy sounds came to his radio receiver.

"Why—why; the paralysis is gone!" Graham said at length.

"Yes, but maybe the octopi don't know it. Rouse the other men at once, and we'll see what we can do."

It was weird, the sight of the lifeless figures of the men stirring to life in the dim-lit water as Graham shook each one's shoulder. The radiophones buzzed and clicked with their excited comments and ejaculations. Keith felt much better. With his men restored to strength, and clustered in a determined, hard-fighting mass, he saw a hope of breaking out and regaining the *NX-1*.

He let them exercise as he had for some minutes, then proceeded to a brisk roll-call. There should be fifteen men and two officers. Rapidly Graham ran over the names, and each time a voice rang back in reply—until he came to the cook.

"McKegnie?... Cook McKegnie?"

There was no answer. Wells stared around the group of dim figures and himself called the name again. But McKegnie was not present. And as the commander and his men realized it the numbing spell of their desperate position settled down on them again like a shroud.

Keith shook off the mood. "Well," he muttered, "I guess the devils got him. Poor McKegnie's seen the wheels go round for the last time.... All right: take command, Graham. I'm going to do a little reconnoitering."

The round entrance hole was some fifteen feet from him, at the far end of the cell. Keith advanced cautiously to it, the peculiar light feeling the water gave him making his steps uncertain. The dim blue illumination made the details of the corridor outside hazy, shadowy, but it seemed to be empty. Peering out, Wells could sight no guarding octopi. He edged closer and stared down to the left. Twenty feet away the vague light tapered into darker gloom, filled with

thick, wavering shadows; but it was apparently devoid of tentacles. He wondered if the octopi were unaware that the effects of their ray had worn off, and peeped cautiously around the edge to the right.

Immediately a long arm whipped out, grasped him around the waist and flung him twisting and turning back into the chamber. Graham laboriously made his way to the commander and helped him to his feet. "Hurt, sir?" he asked anxiously.

"No," Keith gasped. "But that devil—"

He stopped short. The first officer turned and followed his commander's stare.

The entrance hole of the cell had filled with a monstrous shape. A huge octopus was resting there, its unblinking eyes coldly surveying the crew of the *NX-1*. On each of its thick tentacles was a broad band of polished gold. It was the king, the same creature that had inspected them from the throne-dais a few hours before. And behind him in the corridor the men glimpsed another octopus.

Slowly the ruler of the octopi swam into the chamber. Its great eyes centered icily on Keith Wells, standing at the head of his cowering men; and its mighty tentacles waved slowly, gracefully, as if the creature stood in doubt. One of them tentatively reached out and hovered over their heads, moving uncertainly back and forth. Then, like a monstrous water snake, the tentacle poised, flicked out and plucked a man from his comrades.

His shriek of terror rasped in their earphones.

"Steady, men!" Keith cried. "It's hopeless to try and fight them! The monster just wants to look him over!"

The man—Williams, a petty officer—was dangled by the armpit in mid-water and made to slowly revolve. The tip of another huge arm snaked out and for some seconds stroked his body, probing curiously. He panted with fright, and in their earphones his friends could hear his every tortured exhalation. Anxiously, Keith watched. Then, without warning, another tentacle darted up, fastened its tip on the breast of the captive's sea-suit, and deliberately ripped it open.

The doomed man's last scream rang in their helmets as the water poured into his suit. They saw him writhe and struggle desperately in the remorseless grip which held him. The two huge eyes of the cuttlefish surveyed his death throes minutely; watched his agonized struggles gradually weaken; watched his legs and arms relax, his head sink lower.... And then the tentacle let a lifeless body float to the floor.

Jennerby, a huge engineer, went completely mad. "I'll get him, the devil!" he yelled, and before Keith could command him to stay back, had flung himself onto the giant king.

Death came as a mere matter of course. Without apparent effort, the monarch ripped off Jennerby's helmet and sent him spinning back. The man's body writhed and shuddered, and in a moment another stark white face showed where death had struck....

Trembling, sick at heart, the commander yet had to think of his men. "For God's sake," he cautioned them,

"keep back. Don't try to fight now; we've got to wait our chance! Steady. Steady...."

The king's deliberate tentacle again began its slow weaving. It was choosing another victim. And this time it darted straight out at Keith Wells and gripped him with a mighty clutch about the waist.

The commander did not cry out. As he was brought close to the staring eyes, and felt their sinister gaze run over him, it flashed through him for some obscure reason that the monster knew him for what he was, the leader, from the tiny bars on each shoulder of his sea-suit.... He waited for the tentacles to rip it open.

But they did not. Instead, the creature turned and swiftly swam with him out through the entrance hole.

They went to the left in the corridor, further into the heart of the building. The bluish light became stronger. As Keith twisted in the giant monarch's grip he glimpsed the other octopus following with the two dead men. He saved his strength knowing it was hopeless just then to try and struggle free.

Quick as was his passage, he noticed that the walls of the corridor were covered with intricate designs, in bas-relief, and colored. He passed row after row of mural paintings of octopi in various activities, and guessed that they represented the race's history. One was obviously a scene of battle, with a tentacled army locked in combat with another strange horde of fishlike creatures; a second showed the construction of the queer mound-buildings on the sea-floor, with scores of monsters hauling great chunks of material into place, and another pictured the huge audience chamber, with a gold-banded king motionless on his throne.

As the king drew him rapidly along, he had a glimpse through a circular doorway of a large room, inside which were clustered the black shapes of thousands of baby octopi, tended by what were evidently nurses. Other such rooms were passed, and the young commander's brain whirled as he tried to measure the size and progress of this undersea civilization. Perhaps the race of octopi was growing, reaching out;

needed new room to colonize. That would explain why their submarine had been sent through the tunnel....

A voice sounded in his ears:

"Keith? Are you all right?" It was Graham, calling from the cell behind.

"So far," Wells assured him. "I'll keep in touch, and let you know what happens."

At that moment, his captor carried him into a large chamber at the end of the corridor. He looked around, and decided it was a laboratory. He beheld strange instruments, anatomical charts of octopi on the walls and, in one corner, a small jar of glass, in which a dull flame was burning. Many-shaped keen-bladed knives lay on various low tables, and thin, wicked-looking prongs and pincers.

"I'm in their experimental laboratory, Graham," Wells spoke into the mouthpiece of his tiny radio. And then his roving eyes saw something that made him audibly gasp.

"What's the matter, Keith?" came the first officer's anxious voice.

After a moment the commander answered. "It's—it's a pile of human bodies. The bodies of those fishermen. They—they've been experimenting on them...."

Was he, too, Wells wondered, to be experimented on? The sight of that stacked pile of bodies chilled him with horror. He kept his eyes from them, till the octopus with the golden bands swung him through a hinged door in the farther wall.

He found himself in a side room, smaller than the outer chamber, the whole center of which was occupied by a huge glass bell jar, some thirty feet in diameter. Inside it was much strange-looking apparatus on tables, and trays of operating instruments—knives like those in the outer room, and the same thin prongs. The great jar was empty of water, and on one side was an entrance port.

The king tossed Keith into a corner and quickly donned a metal-scaled water-suit. When he had it all

on, and the glass body-container fastened into place, he picked up his captive again and advanced through the bell jar's entrance port into a small water chamber. A moment later Wells felt his body grow heavy as the water of the compartment ran out, and then there was a click and he found himself inside the jar, still held in the merciless grip of a tentacle.

He twisted around to find the cold eyes of the octopus staring at him only a foot away. And as he wondered what was going to happen next, the king unfastened the glass face-shield of the commander's sea-suit with a quick flip of the tip of a tentacle.

Keith's arms were pinned to his sides; he could not move to try to refasten the face-shield. Fearful, he held his breath; held it until his face was purple and his lungs were near to bursting. But at last the limit was reached, and with a great wrench he sucked in a full breath.

It was clean, fresh air!

The air was like a breath of his own world brought down to this cold realm of octopi. Once he had caught up with his breathing it poured new life into his limbs, jaded from the artificial air of the sea-suit. Keith felt his muscles respond, felt his whole body glow with new strength and life. Twelve inches away the king was watching his every reaction closely through the huge helmet of glass. The thought passed through the commander's mind that he was not only king, but chief scientist of this strange water civilization.

Then, while his lungs swallowed hungrily the good, fresh air, several tentacles began to feel around him in an attempt to unfasten the rest of his sea-suit.

Wells blanched at the sudden realization of how helpless he would be if the suit were taken from him. He would then not only be a prisoner of the octopi, but a prisoner of the glass jar, unable ever to leave it, and more than ever at the mercy of his captor's least whim. Not that he had any delusion that he would live long in any case: it was just the simple strong instinct of self-preservation that made him grab at every chance for life.

This thought flashed through his mind, even while the octopus was fumbling with the catches of his suit. And along with it was born a desperate plan of escape. He was in his own element, air; the octopus out of his. If he could crack the glass of the king's helmet, and let the water out and air in!... The glass was only twelve inches away.

The commander stopped his resistance, and at the same time felt about with his legs until he had them well braced against a lower tentacle. He pushed gently, and came a few inches nearer the glass; a little more. Then, with a quick, strong jerk of his body he crashed the steel frame of his helmet square against the cuttlefish's sheathing of glass.

The creature was taken wholly by surprise. Tentacles whipped out to tear the rash human quickly away—but not before Keith had pounded again, and heard the splinter of smashed glass! He had jabbed a hole in the glass body-piece, and already the life-giving water was pouring out!

Panic seized the king, and he became a nightmare of tortured tentacles. Wells was flung wildly away and fetched up against the side of the jar with a crash that for a second stunned him. More and more water poured from the octopus' suit, and air at once rushed in to take its place. The creature's great eyes became filmy, while the revolting spidery body slewed here and there across the jar, all the time whipping and thrashing at the strangling air. Keith scurried from side to side, trying to keep out of reach of the crazy, writhing tentacles. Once a glancing blow knocked him flat, but the monster was altogether unconscious of him and he got away.

Little by little the terrific whipping and coiling of the tentacles quieted down. The drowning king lay in one place now; its loathsome red body, no longer protected by glass, turned bluish. Keith thrilled with elation at his victory.

And then, for the first time, he noticed that there was a full three inches of water on the floor—far too much to spill from the king's suit. A quick look around showed him where it came from. There was a long

crack in the side of the glass jar, at the place where he had been crashed against it—and water was pouring in!

Keith flung himself against the crack, jammed his arm into the broadest part of the leak. But still the water rushed in. The octopus was in its death throes, weakening steadily—but just as steadily the water poured in and rose up the sides of its body. In a flash Wells saw that the liquid would win the race to cover it and allow the monster to resume breathing.

"Oh, damn it!" he cursed fervently. "Now I've got to run for it!"

He stumbled to the port, snapping shut his face-shield as he went. In a moment he had solved the working of the mechanism and was in the water chamber, then outside in the room itself. Fortunately his sea-suit was unhurt. He thanked heaven for that as he tore away a boardlike piece of apparatus and jammed it over the leak in the jar.

Keith paused a moment to plan. The king of the octopi was still writhing in ever weakening struggles, but the water was halfway up his body. "It'll cover him soon," thought the commander, "and then it's a question how long it'll take him to come to. I've got to move fast—slip out into the corridor and run the gauntlet back to the men." His eyes rested on a large knife, and he appropriated it, since he saw nothing else he might use.

For the first time since the beginning of the fight he answered the questions and exclamations that had constantly sounded in his ears from the distant crew. Tersely he told them what had happened, and of the gauntlet he had to run.

"Make ready for a dash to the *NX-1*," he finished. "It's now or never. Wait three minutes for me, and if I don't make it, go ahead anyway. Remember—three minutes. This is an order. So long, fellows!"

He shut his ears to the bedlam of comment that followed. His knife ready, he took a few steps to the

door and pushed out—right into the tentacles of a waiting octopus.

His knife was useless. While locked motionless by three arms of his captor, another streaked out and wrenched it from his hand. Once again Keith was absolutely helpless.

Great confusion resulted in the laboratory. The commander heard no sound, but the guard must have called, for five more octopi darted rapidly out of an adjoining room. Their tentacles writhing in great excitement, they swam past and into the inner chamber to the rescue of their nearly drowned king.

The devil-fish that held Wells almost crushed him to death in its excitement. It was obviously undecided what to do; but finally it sped him down the passageway and cast him back inside the cell with his men. Then it quickly retreated.

The commander staggered to his feet and faced Graham and the others. "A miracle!" he gasped; "I'll tell you later. But now we've got to make our break.

The king's out, and we've got to get away before they bring him to. There's nothing to do but rush the door. It means sure death for half of us, and probably for all—but God help us if the king catches us!"

He paused and surveyed them keenly. "Everybody with me?" he asked. And not one man held back his answer.

Wells smiled a little. "Good!" he said.

There were twelve men and two officers. There were thousands of octopi. On the face of it, their chances seemed hopeless. Not for a second did Keith count on getting many men to the *NX-1*. But he knew where the submarine was, and he had to try.

Tersely he gave them final instructions.

"This corridor leads to the main entrance. That is, to the right—understand? Then straight down the street outside, to the left, is the square where they towed the *NX-1*. I'd say it was a hundred yards.

"There's one guard outside. Graham, you and half the men to the right of the door. I'll take the rest to the left. Our only chance is to try and destroy the octopus' eyes."

His mind cast about desperately for some form of weapon. The only detachable thing on their sea-suits was the small helmet-light, a thing, Keith told himself, without possible offensive use. Still, the beams would enable them to more clearly see their path and keep together, so he ordered them in hand.

The men were grouped and alert. The moment had come.

"Remember," he said, "—its eyes. Then stick together and run like hell. All right—good luck—and let's go!"

Awkwardly, stumbling clumsily in the retarding water, the small group surged through the door. Immediately a black shape pounced upon them from the clustered shadows—the guarding octopus.

Its tentacles seemed to be everywhere. In seconds five men were clutched in its awful grip, their fists rising and falling impotently as the hideous arms constricted and crushed them inward. Keith, free of the clasp, yelled: "The eyes! The eyes! Put out its eyes!"

For answer, a yellow arm clutching a helmet-light broke through the grotesquely milling mass and struck at the cuttlefish's great pools of eyes. It missed, but the switch flicked on, and there stabbed through the gloom a broad, glaringly white ray.

Its effect was astounding. The beam smote the octopus squarely in its huge eyes, and immediately the creature shuddered; writhed with pain. The tentacles released the men—and the monster fled back into the protecting shadows!

A shout from the men roared in the commander's earphones. "They can't stand the light!" he cried. "Thank God! Beams on, everyone! Flash 'em in their eyes! Forward!"

Fourteen shafts of eye-dazzling light forked through the corridor. The tiny company, beating their path with criss-crossing shafts of white, forged ahead. They thrashed the shadows with their beams, probing each inch of water—clearing their way even as a tank hoses machine-gun bullets before its clumsy body. Their former slender chance grew; they filled with hope.

Another swarm of devil-fish, long arms whipping before them, raced from branching corridors and bore down on the company of humans. The men were ready, and fourteen tongues of white met them squarely. They faltered; the weight of their fellows behind shoved them on; but the rays steadied, and the front row of octopi broke in panic. The others at once followed in wild retreat.

"Keep together, men!" Keith ordered sharply. "One beam to each octopus—straight in its eyes till it retreats! Forward!"

They pressed on. The octopi, with eyes used only to the soft blue glow of the cavern, could not stand

against the brilliant rays. Keith leading, the *NX-1's* crew stumbled out into the street.

They faltered a moment when they saw each entrance hole of the mound-buildings shooting out streams of octopi. Hundreds were in sight already. The whole city was evidently alarmed. Wells at once formed his men in a circle, so their beams would guard them on every side and above. Apparently the octopi could not approach within thirty feet of them, and even at that distance they turned and fled, writhing with pain, whenever a shaft of light struck full in their eyes.

"The square's just ahead!" the commander roared. "One last rush, now, and we'll reach the submarine! Stick close; keep your arms locked; and watch out above!"

The circle of men narrowed. The rays gave their tiny cluster the appearance of a monster even more fantastic than those moiling around them—a monster with long straight tentacles of glaring white. They stumbled forward through the magically parting

ranks of black octopi. The beams kept the creatures back; they were helpless before them.

Foot by foot under the inverted bowl of threshing tentacles the *NX-1*'s crew lumbered ahead. The street at last ceased; the wide square opened before them.

"We're here!" Wells yelled exultantly. "This is the—"

His voice fell into abrupt silence. He stared around the square, and his heart went cold indeed. They had reached the right place, but it was empty.

The *NX-1* was not there!

Chapter 8: Cook, the Navigator

Through all these hours, one man had remained on the *NX-1*, and that man was, to put it mildly, scared to death.

Cook Angus McKegnie had been nearest the connecting ladder when Keith Wells roared out the command to retreat above, and his desire to regain a place of safety was so earnest that he made the control room in record time. At once he had felt the tingle of the paralyzing ray. Struck by a horrible thought, he ventured to peer down the ladder—and groaned to see the figures of his comrades, all lying limply on the deck. His portly frame quivered like jelly as realization came to him that he was the only one who had escaped the ray.

Heroic ideas of saving the submarine, of rescuing the men below, flashed wildly through his head. But only for a moment. On second thought, he felt he ought to hide. So, in the tomblike silence that had fallen, the two-hundred-and-twenty-pound McKegnie wormed a way behind an instrument panel, effecting the journey

by vigorous shoves of his stomach. It was minutes later that he first noticed that some sharp jutting object was jutting deep into his ample paunch, but he could do nothing to remedy it. He was hidden, anyway, and he was going to stay hidden!

The cook felt the *NX-1* being towed forward. Then, after a dreadful wait, he heard queer noises down below, and was positive the exit ports had opened. The snakelike slithering and shuffling which followed would mean that the enemy was inside the *NX-1*. The thought brought St. Vitus' dance to his limbs, and, try as he might, he couldn't still them. Then again the ports opened, the gloomy silence returned, and Angus McKegnie was alone with his reflections.

After the first hour he gave voice to them in one simple, bitter sentence. "Just why the hell," he muttered, "did I ever join the Navy?" The silence offered no reply, and McKegnie, desperate from his cramped position, ventured to poke his head around the instrument panel. The faint emergency lights showed the control room to be empty. He decided to

come out, and did so, worming his way back with great difficulty.

Once out, the first thing his eyes fell on was the televue screen. Now the cook had never seen one of the octopi, and the screen showed hundreds of monsters clustering around the *NX-1*. So with unusual promptness he acted, jamming himself once again into his hiding place. Maybe, he thought, they had some way in which they could see into the control room and discover him!

Hours passed. The cook was sopping with sweat. Finally his thoughts emerged into words.

"I got to get out of here!" he said intensely. "I *got* to! And I got to run this submarine!"

The sound of his voice somehow emboldened him. Once more he backed out of his cranny, and with cautious, trembling steps explored the control room. He kept his eyes from the televue, though it had a terrible fascination for him, and surveyed the *NX-1's*

array of control instruments. The prospective navigator groaned at the sight.

There were dozens of mysterious wheels, jutting from every possible angle, squads of black and red-handled levers, whole armies of queer little stud-buttons and dials. His knowledge of cooking helped him not at all in the presence of that maze of devices. Timidly he touched one of the levers, but immediately snatched his hand away as if afraid it would bite. His boldly announced purpose of running the craft went glimmering.

An accidental glimpse of the monsters in the teleview suddenly decided him that he needed a weapon. He hunted frantically through the lockers and found three service revolvers, which he fastened at his waist, adding his own carving knife to the arsenal. But he didn't feel much better. Then, remembering for the first time his sea-suit radio, he yelled: "Mr. Wells! Mr. Wells! Oh, Mr. Wells, where are you? Can you hear me?" There was, of course, no answer.

He tried to bring his muddled thoughts and fears to order. "I got to run this thing," he said doggedly. "*Got* to! Now, let's see: what the hell's this thing for?... What the—"

He broke off short, and his eyes went wide. He had heard a noise!

Yes—there it was again! The same peculiar scraping at one of the exit ports! He glanced fearfully at the televue. "Oh, Lord!" he yelped. "They're comin' in to get me!"

He started to dive back behind the instrument panel, but stopped, drew two guns, and in an agonized muddle trotted back and forth for a moment, waving them. Another look at the screen showed that an exit port was open, admitting two metal-scaled octopi. McKegnie couldn't stand it any longer: he wedged himself behind his panel again. Soon sounds of the metal tentacles on the deck below told him that one of the creatures was coming up the ramp—then slithering into the control room itself. The cook was a lather of cold perspiration.

For a few minutes there was silence. The octopus was apparently surveying this new part of the submarine. Then, without warning, the tip of a metal-scaled tentacle felt around the panel and crept, exploring, up Angus McKegnie's leg—which leg was again suddenly afflicted with St. Vitus' dance. The tentacles coiled, pulled hard—and the cook with a yowl was yanked out into the room.

Dangling upside down, high in the air, he submitted to the fishy stare of the great eyes under the sheathing of glass. But soon he started to squirm, and his violent contortions brought a rush of blood to his head, making him quite dizzy. It was while he was in that state that things started to happen.

First, a great roar rolled through the *NX-1*, and McKegnie found himself flat on the floor with his breath knocked out. Then, while this was registering on his mind, he discovered himself the center of a madly milling set of tentacles, and instinctively scrambled out of the way. From a distance he saw that the tentacles belonged to the octopus that had held him, and that their coilings and threshings were

gradually dying down, until only a quiver ran through them from time to time. While McKegnie was trying to figure this all out he noticed that the monster's glass sheeting was shattered, that it lay in a pool of water, and that the odor of burnt powder was in the air. Looking down he found that he had a gun in his hand. A thin wisp of smoke was curling from the barrel.

"Gee whiz!" he ejaculated. "Gee *whiz*!"

As he stood there recovering from his surprise, he heard the other octopus crawling up the connecting ramp, coming to see what had befallen its fellow. Preceded by two trembling guns, McKegnie tiptoed to the ramp and peered down.

From the darkness he saw another complicated mass of metal tentacles and glass advancing up towards him. Fear smote the cook, and almost without volition he pointed his guns and pulled the triggers. As before, a bullet crashed into the great dome of glass, and he watched a short but terrible death struggle. He had, by himself, slain two octopi!

A tremendous elation filled McKegnie—until it occurred to him that his shots might have been heard outside. At once he ran and looked at the televue view screen, and what he saw on its silver surface took all the triumph abruptly out of him. The octopi outside were darting about with alarming activity; a whole cluster of them was centered at the exit port, and, even as the cook stared, the preliminary sounds of opening it came to his ears.

"Now I *got* to run this ship!" he groaned.

He peered at the mass of levers and wheels, put out a hand, closed his eyes, hesitated, and pulled one of them back. Nothing happened.

He tried another. The noise below grew, but still the *NX-1* remained motionless. Desperate, the cook jerked several other levers. The whine of electric motors surged through the silence; the submarine shuddered and slewed off to the right, as if trying to dig into the sea-floor.

"I got it started!" he cried. He did something else. The *NX-1* stuck her bow dizzily up and sped into the misty-blue realm above in a grand, sweeping circle. The sea-floor with its mound-buildings and swarming octopi fell away behind with a rush.

"There!" muttered the triumphant cook. "But—how did I do it?"

The submarine was rising like a sky-rocket. McKegnie remembered suddenly that Wells had said the cavern was only a few miles high; he must now be very near the top. He held his breath while he pushed a likely looking lever the other way.

He was lucky. The *NX-1* capered like a two-year-old, kicked up her stern and bolted eagerly for the depths once more. Again the floor of the cavern rushed up at him, again he pulled the potent lever back, and again the submarine meteored upward.

This procedure went on for some time. McKegnie was only running an elevator. Was he doomed to dash up and down between floor and ceiling forever? He gave

forth pints of sweat, now and then groaning as the submarine grazed horribly close to top or bottom. The dead octopus at his feet slithered limply around on the crazy-angling deck.

"I can't keep this up forever!" the cook said peevishly. "Now, what the hell's this thing for?"

He turned it, and the *NX-1* tilted in one of her dives and raced forward, midway between ceiling and floor. Her navigator relaxed slightly. He had found the major controls; at least he had been able to stop his dizzy game of plunging up and down. Then, just as he was beginning to wonder where he could go, a large red spot glowed at the edge of the location chart.

"Oh, Lord!" he cried. "That's the other submarine—an' it's comin' after me!"

Evidently it was, for the red spot rapidly approached the green one. The paralyzing ray tingled, and a moment later the enemy's huge bulk loomed on the televue screen, a band of violet light spearing from one of her jutting knobs.

Frantically McKegnie juggled his levers, and then it was that the *NX-1* really showed what was in her. She emulated, on a grand scale, a bucking bronco: she stood almost on her nose, and threatened to describe somersaults; she tried it the other way, on her stern; she rolled dizzily; she all but looped the loop, and went staggering around the cavern in great erratic bounds that must have made the octopi think she was in the hands of a mad-man—which she practically was. Her designer would have had heart failure.

In the televue screen the frantic McKegnie would see the octopi submarine rush erratically by with a flash of its violet heat ray; the location chart showed the red spot zigzagging drunkenly around the green one. Each boat made occasional short, crazy darts at the other; sometimes they would stand approximately still. It was a riotous game of tag, and McKegnie knew too well that he was "it."

During one brief pause the anguished cook found himself groaning aloud: "Oh, Mr. Wells, where are you? I can't keep this up! I can't! I can't!"

There were still several important-looking controls that were mysteries to him. But what if he should pull one and open all the exit ports? He shuddered at the thought.

Things had become nightmarish. The ship was pitted scores of places by the heat ray. The control room had grown stifling. McKegnie was losing pounds of flesh, and literally stood in a pool of his own perspiration. The octopi craft kept doggedly after the *NX-1*, no matter how often and effectually the sweating cook's reckless hands prevented her getting the heat ray home.

For a long time the two ships continued to race up and down. The *NX-1* would plunge, pirouette around the other, and scamper away towards the ceiling as if enjoying it all hugely, abruptly to forsake her course and come zooming down once more. She would weave in romping circles and seem to go utterly crazy as her jumbled navigator pulled his levers and turned his wheels in a frantic effort to get somewhere.

To get somewhere! Yes—but where?

"Oh, Mr. Wells, where are you?" the harried cook would bleat at intervals.

Or, plaintively: "Now, what the hell's *this* thing for?"

Chapter 9: At Bay

Fourteen humans stood at bay on the cold sea-floor, dazed by the ruthless stroke of ill-luck which had taken the *NX-1* from where they had left it.

"It's gone," whispered Graham over and over in a hopeless tone. Keith tried to pull himself together. He had to think of his men.

In a second, his whole plan, which had seemed to be approaching success so rapidly, was smashed by the disappearance of the submarine. Mechanically he kept his helmet-light playing into the ever-thickening eyes and tentacles around him, while he scanned the sea-floor nearby. It was filling more closely than ever with the black, writhing forms of the cuttlefish. The rays still held them back, but their great bulk loomed over the small party of humans like a sinister storm cloud. Soon, in their overwhelming mass, they would crush down, and the submarine's crew be conquered by sheer force of numbers.

"Look!" Keith cried. "There's where she was lying!"

He pointed out on the floor of the square a deep groove, obviously made by the hull of the *NX-1*. Its length and jaggedness seemed to denote that the submarine had tried to bore into the bed of the cavern itself. Wells was mystified. If the octopi-ship had towed her away, she would certainly not have gouged that deep scar on the sea bottom....

But he dismissed the strange disappearance from his mind. He had to work out a plan of action.

"Keep together, men, and follow that scar!" he ordered tersely. "There's a chance that the *NX-1*'s somewhere further along!"

It was a futile hope, he knew—but there was nothing else. The tiny group, centered in the inverted bowl of black, writhing tentacles, lumbered onward.

Then the octopi struck with another weapon, in an effort to dull the spearing beams of white. Here and there from the mass of black an even blacker cloud began to emerge. It quickly settled over the whole

scene, pervading it with a pitchy, clinging darkness that obscured each man from his neighbor.

"Ink!" cried one of them. It was sepia from the cuttlefish's ink sacs—the weapon with which these monsters of the underseas blind and confuse their victims.

"Faster!" the commander roared in answer. "And for heaven's sake, keep together!"

They huddled closer. Under the protecting cloud of ink the mass of octopi pressed nearer. The struggle became fantastic, unreal, as the brilliant beams of white bored through the utter blackness searching for eyes which the men knew were there, yet could not see until their rays chanced upon them. Snaky shadows milled horribly close to the little group of bulging yellow figures. Blacker and blacker grew the water; they could not always see the monsters as they drove them back on each side. Now and then a bold tentacle actually touched one of them for a moment before its owner was thrust, blinded, away.

Suddenly the dark cloud cleared a little as the fight moved into an unseen current. Their range of vision lengthened to ten or twelve feet; they could dimly sense the looming mass of cuttlefish: and it was less often that one of the monsters darted forward, daring the rays of white, and became altogether visible. When this did happen, half a dozen dazzling beams converged on the octopus' eyes and drove it back in writhing agony.

The men were the hub of a grotesque cartwheel, whose spokes were inter-crossing rays of white. They still forged onward along the groove, but moved more slowly now, and Keith Wells, tired to death, realized the combat could not go on much longer. Their advance was useless; a mere jest. The *NX-1* had vanished. It would only be a question of time before their batteries gave out, or the swarms of octopi crushed in on the struggling crew. Their overwhelming numbers would tell in the end.... The men were silent, except for the occasional gasps which came from their laboring lungs.

And then the king of the octopi appeared.

Keith had been wondering, in the aching turmoil that was his brain, where the gold-banded monarch was. He knew the monster had been rescued, and he dreaded coming face to face once more with that huge form. Now, armlets of glittering yellow suddenly flashed in the thick of the besieging tentacles, and two great evil eyes glared for a second at Keith Wells. The commander flung a burst of light at them and laughed crazily as the monster scurried back. For a few moments the king was not visible.

"Well, fellows," Wells said, "it won't be long now. His Majesty's back on the field." He grinned a little through his weary face. "I wonder what he'll hatch up to combat our helmet-lights? Watch close: he's damn clever!"

The commander did not have long to wonder. The vague wall of tentacles began retreating deeper into the ink. Keith could not imagine the reason for it, but held himself taut and ready. His men, likewise noting the move, unconsciously grouped closer, waiting tensely for they knew not what.

The king of the octopi had indeed hatched a plan of attack. After a moment the mass of creatures again became slowly visible, but this time when the rays shot out they did not hold them back. Could not—for their eyes were not visible.

"My God!" Wells cried. "They're coming backwards!"

It was so. The octopi—no doubt under their ruler's orders—had turned themselves around, and now, with eyes directly away from the dazzling shafts of white, were closing slowly in on the humans from all sides. The helmet-lights were useless. They could not reach the creatures' eyes.

Tentacles coiling, whipping, interweaving, the wall of flesh pressed in. Death stared the helpless crew of the *NX-1* in the face. First Officer Graham shrugged his shoulders and said tiredly:

"Well, I guess it's all over.... Unless," he added with a feeble smile, "somebody figures a way to melt us through the sea-floor...."

Keith Wells' face suddenly lit up with an idea. He swung around and roared:

"The hell it's over! We can go *up*!"

His crew understood at once. "What fools we—" Graham began, but Keith cut him short.

"Listen," he rapped quickly. "Jam together in one bunch and lock arms tight. When I give the word, flood your suits with air. We'll go up like comets; crash right through the devils.... Hurry!... All ready?"

He saw that they were. "Then, together—go!" he commanded.

As one man the crew adjusted their air-controls, bulging the sea-suits with air. Their weighted feet left the cavern floor at once, and, locked tightly together, the whole fourteen of them shot like a bullet to the living ceiling of unsuspecting cuttlefish above.

They hit with a terrific crash. Keith was momentarily stunned by the force of impact. He felt himself torn

away from his men, felt a dozen tentacles snake over him, and mechanically stabbed out with his helmet-light. For a moment he was held; then the air and his light pulled him through, and he broke out through the top.

In his rocketing upward progress the extra oxygen rapidly cleared his mind. Glancing below he saw a great, dark, many-fingered cloud dropping rapidly away, and was glad to know that the octopi could not follow him into the lesser pressures above without their suits. Over the dark cloud he glimpsed a few scattered pin-points of light—the helmet-beams of the other men. They were rising as swiftly as he.

"Thank God!" he murmured reverently. "We broke through! We broke through!"

Chapter 10: The Return of the Wanderer

Wells watched the several helmet-lights shooting upwards and wondered if they represented all the men that had got safely through the net of tentacles. Remembering the rocky ceiling they were rapidly approaching, he ordered the others to reduce speed by discharging air from their sea-suits. He received no articulate answer.

Although he cut down the rush of his own progress, it was with a jar that he bounded into the top of the cavern. As he dangled there, he beheld four light beams hurtling upward; his earphones registered crash after crash: and then he saw the beams go spinning down into the gloom again, weaving and crossing fantastically, the shock having jerked them from their owner's hands. Keith had lost his own helmet-light below, but peering around he could make out a few vague forms, bumping and twisting in the current.

"Graham!" the commander called. "Graham, you there?" After a moment his first officer's voice came thickly back.

"Yes—here. A bit groggy. That crash...." Wells swam clumsily towards him.

"I guess only a few of us broke through," the commander said slowly. As the two officers hung at the roof, swinging grotesquely, one by one the other men came to their senses and reported their presence in the radiophone. Keith ordered them to cluster around him, and soon eight weird figures had grouped nearby. After a while they located two others, which brought their total to ten men and two officers. They looked a long time, but could not find any more. Two were gone.

Deep silence fell over the tiny group. The dark mass of the rocky ceiling scraped their helmets; below, the bluish waters tapered into a thick gloom, hiding, miles beneath, the mound-buildings and swarming octopi.

One of the men spoke. His words were audible to everyone, and they voiced the thought in every brain:

"What're we going to do now?"

Keith had no answer. They had escaped the immediate danger, but it was only a temporary respite. The commander knew it was hopeless to try and locate the tunnel leading to the outer sea, for they were very tired, and in their clumsy suits they would be able to swim only a few rods. Their helmet-lights were gone; they had played their last card.

"They're goin' to find us after a while," the pessimistic voice continued. "They'll send that submarine of theirs after us—or maybe they'll come up in their metal suits...."

"Well," Keith replied with forced cheerfulness, "then we'll have to fight 'em off."

"Why not rip our suits an' end it now—" began another, but Graham's voice cut in sharply.

"Quiet!" he said. "I heard something!"

The men stilled abruptly. In tense silence their ears strained at the headphones. Wells asked: "What did you hear?"

"Wait!" Graham interrupted, listening intently. "There it is again! Listen! Can't you hear it? Why, it sounded like—like—"

Keith concentrated his whole mind on listening, but could catch nothing at all. He was just about to give up when he caught a faint, jumbled murmur—the murmur of a human voice.

"My God!" he whispered. The voice, little by little, grew, and Wells could distinguish words. They formed into a complete sentence. Keith heard it plainly. It was:

"Now, what the hell's this thing for?"

Unmistakably, it was the voice of Cook Angus McKegnie, whom they all had thought dead.

Amazed, the men of the crew started to jabber.
"Quiet!" Wells ordered sharply. He listened again.
McKegnie's voice was growing quickly and steadily louder.

"McKegnie!" the commander cried excitedly.
"McKegnie, can you hear me?" There was no answer.
Patiently Wells waited a minute, every second of which increased the volume of his long-lost cook's bewildered tones. Again he tried.

"McKegnie! Can you hear me? This is Commander Wells. McKegnie!"

The cook's stammering voice came back:

"Why—why—is that you, Mr. Wells? Did I hear you, Mr. Wells?"

"Yes!" Keith shouted impatiently. "This is Commander Wells! For heaven's sake, McKegnie, where are you?"

"I don't know, sir!" the cook responded. "Where are you?"

Keith was for the moment perplexed. "But—but, are you a prisoner?" he questioned. And he could have sworn he heard a distinct note of pride as the invisible McKegnie replied: "Oh, no, sir! Not yet! These devils been tryin' their best to get me, but they couldn't! No, sir!"

Wells became more and more puzzled. "Then—but—you're not running the *NX-1*, are you?"

McKegnie's voice was much louder now, and growing every second. The note of pride persisted. "Of course, sir!" he confirmed. "It was kind of hard at first, with these octopises botherin' me, but I got onto it pretty quick. That octopis ship chased me with them heat rays for a long time, but I ain't seen them lately. I guess I kinda tired them out."

His last words grew louder with a rush, and from the dark depths beneath a long shape suddenly appeared, hurtling up at the group of astounded men in a zoom that bade fair to take it straight through the ceiling. It was the *NX-1*.

"Dive, man, dive!" Keith yelled. "Cook, pull that black-handled lever towards you! Yank it back! Yank it back! Quick!" He sighed with relief as he saw his madly-driven submarine pause, whip its nose downward, and crash back for the depths from which it had come.

The commander spoke rapidly. "McKegnie, listen: Leave the black lever halfway, so you'll level out. Straighten your helm. We're only a little above you; come round in a circle till I tell you to stop."

The *NX-1* came out of her dive, and, as the cook evidently shoved her helm over, went skirting around in a wide, drunken circle, some thousand feet below her regular crew.

"All right!" Keith shouted. The fear that the octopi submarine would dart back before he could get aboard his ship was looming in his mind. "You're at the helm, Cook; there's a wheel right over your head. Spin it around—oh, my God, there you go again!" He groaned while the *NX-1* went swooping off on a repetition of her crazy circle.

"Sorry, sir," the culinary navigator said thickly. "I guess I got the wrong thing."

"Now!" Wells roared. "Spin that wheel above your head.... That's right—right—there! Don't touch a thing, Cook! We're coming down."

The submarine had paused directly beneath them, listing slightly to port. Then began the cautious business of the descent. Under Wells' rapid orders the men linked arms again and discharged more air from their sea-suits. Slowly, thin chains of bubbles rising behind them, they sank towards the dim shape of the *NX-1* below. Wells' eyes kept probing the thick gloom far beneath. Every moment he expected to see it disgorge a swarm of octopi.

They neared the submarine, and saw numberless pitted spots in her body, where the heat ray had stabbed for a moment. In their excitement they missed their level by some feet, but clutching together they admitted more air and soon rose even with the starboard exit port.

"Swim forward," Keith ordered. "Hurry!" The weird figures groped clumsily, and very slowly neared the port. The commander, in the van, at last reached out and gripped its jutting external controls. He could not work them at first: his hands were numb and awkward.

As he tugged and struggled with them a shout rang in his headphone. It was McKegnie, scared to death.

"Oh, hurry, Mr. Wells!" he yelled. "Quick! Quick, please! The octopis ship's comin', sir! The red light's back!"

Chapter 11: To the Death

The emergency steadied Keith's fingers. He got the door open and motioned Graham and six men inside the water chamber. The passage took but a minute. Then he sent the rest of the crew in, being himself the last to enter. When the chamber was finally empty, and Wells had stepped through the inner door onto the lower deck of the *NX-1*, a great sigh of relief broke from him. Never before had anything looked so good as that brilliantly lit deck with its familiar maze of machinery and bulkheads.

"Thank God," he said simply, and his joy was shared by the whole crew. A new feeling had come over them. Back home—in their own submarine, their own element—they had at least a fighting chance with the octopi. But Keith let them waste no time. He knew that a final, desperate duel to the death with their foe still was ahead. "Above to the control room," he ordered. "Fast!"

They lumbered up the connecting ramp. A disheveled, wild-eyed form met them. Keith couldn't help

chuckling as he passed the now much thinner and paler cook, with the arsenal handy at his waist. On the deck of the control room lay a huge tentacled body, metal-scaled, with its dome of glass shattered and its great cold eyes staring unseeingly away. "I killed him," stammered McKegnie pridefully; "but Mr. Wells—look at that red light, sir!"

Keith glanced rapidly at the location chart, ripping off his sea-suit as he did. The fateful red stud was moving swiftly down on the motionless green one. The men had surrounded McKegnie, laughing and slapping him on the back, but the commander's terse orders jerked them abruptly back to action.

"The rectifiers, Graham: clean out this stale air. Sea-suits off; at emergency posts. Take the helm, Craig; you, Wetherby, trim the ship. No, no, Cook—keep away from the controls!"

The *NX-1* balanced herself; fresh air came rushing in, sweeping out the stale. Keith stared at the location chart, waiting for the submarine to be ready. The red light was almost upon them.

"Right!" he roared at last. "Diving rudder controls, Graham! Full speed for the tunnel!"

At that moment the octopi ship swept into view, its full battery of offensive weapons flaring forth. The paralyzing ray tingled again and again over the control room. Someone laughed at its uselessness. The violet heat ray leveled full at them, but the commander avoided it with "Port ten, starboard ten! Maintain zigzag course to the tunnel." He understood the enemy's weapons now; he was throbbing with the fierce thrill of action. This duel was to be the climax of their whole adventure. "And, by heaven," he promised, "it's going to be a fight!"

The other craft seemed to realize the *NX-1* was now in expert hands. She raced along to starboard for some minutes, her heat ray trying vainly to steady on the American's weaving form. Wells wondered if the king of the octopi was aboard her, in command; he thought perhaps the ship had postponed her chase of McKegnie to pick him up. "I hope he is!" the commander breathed, and fingered the torpedo lever. He had some debts to pay.

The *NX-1*, engines working smoothly, proceeded on a desperate dash for the tunnel that led to the outer sea. But the octopi ship apparently knew what Keith intended, for she abandoned her offensive rays, changed course a few degrees and slowly but steadily pulled ahead. "Damn!" Keith exclaimed. "She'll get there before us!"

The dim shape dwindled on the screen, and before long her bulk had disappeared entirely. Wells then could watch her swift, straight progress only on the location chart.

Ten minutes later the funnel-like opening of the tunnel loomed on the teleview, and squarely in front, blocking it, was the waiting form of the octopi submarine.

"Quarter speed!" Keith snapped. "Hold her steady, Graham; I'm going to try a bow torpedo. I think we're beyond their ray."

Sighting his range on the telescopic range-finder, he worked the *NX-1* slowly into position. He noticed that

his first officer was staring oddly at him. He was bothered by the queer look. "What's wrong?" he asked impatiently.

"But—what about Hemmy Bowman?"

Bowman! In the rush of action and suspense, Keith Wells had completely forgotten his officer in the enemy submarine. "Oh, God!" he groaned. The cruel situation that had stayed his hand once before had again come to falter his course of action. The men were watching him; Graham had a question in his eyes. They all knew what had to be decided....

Keith shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. It was his greater duty to destroy the octopi submarine. And yet —

"Fish for Hemmy, Sparks," he ordered. "Craig, keep present distance from enemy. Full stop."

A moment later the radio operator looked up. "Mr. Bowman on the phones, sir." With a heavy weight on

his heart the commander clipped on the extension headphones.

"Hemmy?"

"Keith? Keith? Thank God you're alive!" Bowman's voice shook with gladness. "You're all back on the *NX-1*, Keith? The whole crew's with you? Oh, Lord, it's good to hear you again!"

"Yes. We got back all right, Hemmy—a miracle. They've still got you prisoner?"

"Yes.... Keith—you're trying to dodge out of the tunnel, aren't you?"

Wells smiled bitterly, and as he paused to frame an answer Bowman spoke again.

"I want you to blow up this submarine, Keith," he said quickly. "A favor to me."

He cut Wells short when the commander started to interrupt. "Wait! Let me finish," he pleaded. "I want to

explain. I'd been hoping—but never mind that....
Keith, a while ago I managed to work loose. I lost my head completely and tackled these devils. It was a foolish thing to do; they overcame me, naturally. But, in the struggle, they tore my sea-suit."

"What!"

"Oh, just a tiny tear, or I wouldn't have lasted till now. But a leak all the same—in the right leg. Since then I've been gripping the edges of the fabric as tightly as I can—but I couldn't keep the water inside this ship from seeping through. It came in slowly at first, then faster as my hands grew numb. It's up to my neck now, Keith ... and—it won't be long! I've just a few minutes left...."

The faint words tapered into silence.

"No!" roared Keith in a great rush of emotion. But Hemmy's eager voice came right back:

"Oh yes, you must! It would be a mercy to kill me, Keith."

There were tears in the commander's eyes. "Are you sure, Hemmy?" he asked. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes. It would be a mercy."

Wells' lips formed a straight grim line. His words squeezed through it tightly. "All right, Hemmy. Thanks. Thanks. I—I'll go after them now, old man. I'll try and keep in touch with you through the duel, but I—I can't promise—"

He could almost see Hemingway Bowman give his old familiar smile as he answered:

"Then so long, Keith!"

Commander Keith Wells studied the televue screen. The men were half afraid to look at his strained blanched face.

Repeatedly the violet beam speared through the water, reaching for the *NX-1*'s bow.

"Turn ship. Line up for stern torpedoes," the commander ordered harshly. He realized he could not hold his submarine steady to obtain a perfect sight, for the heat ray needed only thirty seconds to melt through their shell. He would have to swing the ship slowly about; and, as the shape of the enemy crossed the hair-lines on the range-finder, unleash his torpedoes and gamble on hitting the moving target.

The *NX-1* swung around, always maintaining a slight forward motion and zigzagging constantly to nullify the heat beam. Wells watched the range-finder closely. The octopi ship slanted downwards, the deadly violet ray stabbing from her bow. Slowly the black dot that represented her appeared on the dial, and slowly it dropped towards the crossed lines that showed the perfect firing point.

Keith grasped the torpedo lever. The *NX-1*'s stern was towards her target. Dead silence hung in the control room. The *NX-1* swung slightly. The octopi craft appeared directly in the middle of the dial.

Wells pulled back the lever.

The hiss of compressed air sprang from her stern. He had fired two tubes, his whole stock of stern torpedoes. The pair of dreadful weapons leaped out and settled on their course. Keith shot his gaze to the television.

The torpedoes missed. Only by feet, but a miss all the same. They raced on past the octopi submarine and, with a tremendous, ear-numbing explosion, burst on the wall of the cavern beyond. Both ships reeled from the shock. Graham swore viciously, but Wells' masklike face showed no slightest change of expression....

A voice rang in Keith's headphones. "Tough, Keith! Better luck next time!" Then the commander winced. He simply could not answer Hemmy Bowman; could not answer that fine, brave voice....

The stern torpedoes were gone. The tubes could not be reloaded, for the paralyzing ray bound the men to the control room. That left them two torpedoes in the bow.

The violet heat ray kept fingering hungrily on their outer hull, and every man knew that the plates were weakening under the steady strain, which was only lessened by the *NX-1*'s constant zigzagging. The control room was very hot. Both ships were now a full mile from the tunnel entrance. Keith plunged the *NX-1* down, swung her around, to bring his bow tubes to bear, and zigzagged upwards.

It was obvious that the octopi craft had been alarmed by the terrific explosion. They now adopted tactics similar to the American ship's, and for awhile both submarines circled cautiously, maneuvering for an opening.

"If only we could keep the ship steady!" Graham muttered. "But then that heat ray'd get us!"

The commander kept his eyes on the teleview. Again and again the violet shaft pronged at them. The heat grew stifling. Sweat was pouring from all the men's bodies. Every face was strained and taut.

"Starboard full!" Wells said suddenly. "A little up, Graham!" He had seen a chance; the octopi craft was slightly above, and in a moment would pass directly in the line of the bow tubes. The *NX-1* stuck her nose up, swung rapidly to the right. Keith pulled back the firing lever, releasing one torpedo.

The long messenger of death hurtled straight for the enemy's hull. They watched its course breathlessly....

"My God!" the first officer groaned. "Could they see it coming?" For the octopi submarine had swung to one side, neatly dodging the speeding tube of dynamite.

"One left!" he added bitterly. "One left!"

A desperate plan formed in Keith Wells' mind. His last torpedo simply had to strike the mark; he could take no chances with it. He motioned the haggard-faced Graham to him.

"There's only one thing left to do," he said quietly.

"We've got to deliberately face that heat ray; chance its puncturing our plates."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Get in very close, so as to make our last torpedo sure to hit. We've got to approach the enemy head-on at full speed. We'll corkscrew up to them until we get within two hundred yards, then go straight forward for ten or fifteen seconds, giving us the opportunity to sight the remaining torpedo directly on them. The heat ray may break through before I fire—but when I do fire it's a sure hit."

The men had heard every word. Quietly Wells ordered:

"Take the torpedo control, Graham. I'll take the helm."

The first officer obeyed without a word. Keith grasped the helm. The plans were made for their last desperate attempt.

"Right," the commander said shortly. "Here we go."

There had been a taut silence before, but now, knowing that they were deliberately offering themselves a perfect target for the heat ray in order to get their last torpedo home, the intensity was almost unbearable. The men felt like shrieking, jumping—doing anything to break the awful hush. The air was charged with the same unnameable something that heralds a typhoon.

Keith Wells was like a white statue at the helm, save for the betraying trickles of sweat that coursed down his drawn cheeks. His hands moved the wheel slowly from port to starboard; his eyes bored at the screen before him. The ship was in command of a man of steel, a man with but one purpose....

"Up—up," he ordered. "Hold—in trim—full speed forward!"

He had brought the *NX-1* directly in line with the octopi ship. And now the craft leaped forward under full power, while he shot the helm back and forth ceaselessly. His ship was describing a corkscrewing motion, weaving straight at the enemy. Grasping her

opportunity, the octopi submarine remained motionless, steadily dousing the approaching American craft with her silent violet ray and driving the temperature in the control room to even greater heights.

The distance between them rapidly lessened. Would the plates stand it? Would the ray melt through the weakened steel before he could fire? With an effort Keith drove these doubts from his mind ... but he could not banish a certain dull, steady ache from his consciousness....

The range dwindled. The heat became intolerable. Everyone's clothing was sopping wet. A man ripped off his shirt, gasping for air. Wells kept his eyes on the screen, though half-blinded by smarting sweat. The plates had to give soon, he knew.

The octopi submarine, beam on and dead ahead, began to move to port at quickly increasing speed. At once Keith stopped swinging the helm, and the *NX-1's* corkscrewing motion of protection ceased. And then came the real test, the gauntlet of seconds.

Right straight into the retreating violet beam they went, at top speed. They gained rapidly. The heat was furnace-like. The commander, watching the range-finder, kept moving the helm slightly over. A shaft of violet heat spanned the two shells of metal. For ten seconds it had held on the *NX-1*. The black dot of the enemy craft moved slowly to exact center on the dial. Fifteen seconds ... twenty ... twenty-three—

"Fire!"

Graham jammed the torpedo lever back.

"Crash dive!"

The deck tilted downward. And Wells' white lips formed the words, "So long, Hemmy!"—and he tore the phones from his head.

Seconds later a titanic explosion sounded through the cavern; echoed and re-echoed in vasty roars. The American craft's lights went off—but not before her men had seen, in the teleview, a fire-shot maelstrom

where a moment before the octopi submarine had been.

"We got them!" yelled Graham.

A roar of exultation burst from every throat. The men flung their arms out, jumped, yelled crazily. Faint emergency lights lit the scene.

"Below, at regular posts," Wells ordered. "Reload bow and stern tubes. Graham, see to the lights." He himself remained at the helm. In a few moments the submarine had climbed back to the level of the tunnel. At quarter speed she nosed into the wide entrance, and slowly forged into the dense, deceptive shadows.

The commander acted mechanically. Again by touch he steered his ship through the black, ragged cleft. Fifteen minutes after leaving the cavern of the octopi her bow poked through the weaving kelp into the free, salty depths of the Atlantic Ocean.

There was one more task to perform, and Wells lost no time in doing it. When two hundred yards away he halted the *NX-1*, steadied her and sighted the stern tubes just above the dark tunnel hole. Quickly he sent forth two torpedoes.

A huge roar rumbled through the water, whipping the beds of kelp to mad convulsions. "Turn around," the commander ordered harshly. He sighted his bow tubes and again let loose a bolt of two torpedoes. Then he sent the submarine forward, and, through the televue, examined what his four weapons had done.

Huge chunks of rock had been tumbled down, completely closing the tunnel.

"Well," said Graham, "it's over! Finished! They'll never get through that!"

A full-throated cheer burst from the men below, a cheer that rang for minutes as they realized they were free forever of the octopi, of the cold

underwater city, of the clutching tentacles. Graham grinned broadly.

"Sound happy—eh?" he chuckled. "Say, Keith, it's good we've got those two octopi our fighting cook killed. Knapp would never believe our story without them!"

He stared curiously at his commander. Wells was standing quite still, facing the televue screen. A strange, far-away look was in his eyes.

"What's the matter, old man?" the first officer asked, smiling straight at him. "Aren't you glad we won through?"

"Of course," answered Keith with a tired smile in return.

"But why did you look that way?" Graham persisted. And Keith Wells told him:

"I was just wondering if Hemmy told the truth."